BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

NO:8
50p

ORIGINAL FICTION AND ART

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ILLUSTRATED BY JOUNI WAARAKANGAS (p.2), MATT BROOKER (pp.6, 13-18, 28), FRANK DEXTER (p.11), SMS (pp.20-22), MICHAEL COBLEY (pp.31, 33) AND KAISER BILL.

ON PAYMENT OF DUE RANSOM

Steve Sneyd

It had to be one of these three.

Had to be, because no other strangers had entered Kragujevac, not in this week, this month ... indeed, not in nineteen years. He, Lazaris, had seen to that.

None in nineteen years - and then three caught the same day. And only one could be Chastillon - yet none resembled him in the least.

Again Lazaris walked round the three examining them from all angles. The dirty hunchbacked dwarf in the stained black cloak and the cap with the long crow's feather, bent almost at right angles so that its tip tickled his forehead, grinned impudently. Lazaris felt his cheeks tighten - but there would be time for infliction of pain later. First, he must know.

The giant with the Camarthian colouring, the bright red hair, eyes blue as ice shadows, skin pale as curdled milk, stared indifferently at nothing. Too tall, far too tall, as much too tall as the dwarf was too short. And yet, there was something about the detached look. But a man cannot grow in captivity ... even if the hair, the skin, the eyes, were the fruit of some infinitely skillful masquerade, some lost art of Byzance or Roum or Andalus, still, the height could not be changed.

And the third - not even the sex was right. A thin girl, the face, when once more he snatched the veil aside, delicately saffron, the eyes stretched and thin like the clawmarks of a cat, the cheekbones high. A Tatar or Khwarezm perhaps, or maybe even from still farther East ... and her robes implied that, silk the cost of a fine kingdom, embroidered with winged and snarling beasts, firedrakes perhaps, clinging to a shape perfect with the delicacy of fresh youth.

A petulant voice snarled from behind him: "Kill them all and have done, Great Husband. Or does the onset of age decay your faculties and soften you to foolish pity as the moths eat through my lace?"

"Silence, whore," he grunted, without even looking round. The guard, well trained by fear, ignored the bickering between their Lord and Lady ... anyway, such politenesses were the small change of conversation between the two, no longer worth even gossip in the barracks mess or to pass time on boring sentry duty at an outpost. Yet perhaps Elizabeta had a point. Why should he not kill all three? The girl was lovely, true ... and he could perhaps find time and place to enjoy her well before his hag-wife managed to poison her as she had done so many favourites before.

The dwarf, still smiling impudently, might combine such foolish courage with the entertaining gifts so many dwarfs possessed to save them in a world of bigger men ... and, tired beyond weariness of the poor amusement offered by this backward rat's nest of a land, would it not be good to be made to laugh by something new? Better still, might not new jokes briefly at least put his horrid Contessa in a better humour?

Even the Carmathian might offer good sport. They could be trained, he knew, as wrestlers, runners, daring climbers, made perfect bodyguards once trained, ever alert, unsleeping, and immensely strong. And if during the course of training he killed one or two of the Castle Guard, well, they had grown soft and needed shaking up.

"I shall watch this foolishness no more. Save me the female's silks when you have dealt with her ... and make sure that her pathway to Hell does not lead through your bed." The petulant voice again, a flounce of skirts, and she was gone from the Audience Chamber. Lazaris stroked his pointed graying beard and once again briefly considered having her destroyed.

But he knew only too well that these mountaineers obeyed him only because of her. Her blood, her descent from a thousand years of tribal warlords, half of them gods or their messengers according to the foolish tales the nursemaids told their charges. If there were but a child in whose name he could rule ... and the fault was not his, he had proved that on serving maids enough, though none, nor their offspring, had ever survived once the she-wolf knew ...

With a shake of the head, he pushed the unpleasant thoughts aside. That was not the problem for today. "Grenich."

BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

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BACK BRAIN RECLUSE
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"Yes, Pan Lazaris." The tall hawk-faced Captain of his Guard stepped forward ... damn the man, could he not ever learn to call him Count, not some foolish mountain title that always seemed to shimmer faintly with contempt as rotten fish glows in the dark. "Tell me again how you caught them."

"Yes, Pan ... the dwarf we found -" the man showed no impatience at having to go through the story yet again "- just where your spy predicted, rolled inside a carpet in the latest load of goods from the floating market on the Nrvic Sea."

"And, as I instructed, you did not search until you were past the Gorge entrance and out of sight of the Venetian merchants?"

"Yes, Pan."

"And what did the dwarf say when caught?"

"Nothing ... as you can see he has said nothing at all."

"And the Carmathian?"

"He appeared at the gate of the outpost at Obrovik Peak, at midnight, last night. He banged on the gate quite openly. At first the garrison thought it was a Tatar trick, but at last they cautiously opened, searched him, and admitted him to the tower, having taken the obvious precaution of binding him first."

"And he did not object to this treatment?"

"He stood as calm as a good horse for its master to mount, just as he stands now."

"And said nothing?"

"Have you ever known a Carmathian who speaks any Christian tongue?"

"I am asking the questions, Captain."

"Yes, Pan ... nothing, not even a sound, as if he were dumb."

"And the girl ... how comes she here?"

"Why, Pan, you found her yourself."

"So I did, Captain ... get back to your duties."

Yes, the girl ... she was the strangest puzzle of all. He had not been able to sleep, had risen at dawn to climb to the highest tower of Kraguj Castle, had from there overlooked all his - or rather Elizabeta's - realm as if it were a toy. At his feet, the towers and battlements, rooftops and bartizans, of the fortress, dropping to the little town bound in an oxbow of river. To the other side, the sheer cliffs dropping to the same waters, still wrapped in shadows. High to east, north and south, the sunlight already striking the peaks, bare and scorched, that rimmed his statelet, picking out the towers scattered along the highest ridges that watched for any move among the wild Tatars who circled him on three sides.

Among their lesser foothills hid the hanging limestone valleys where grew the groves

of terebinth, whose oozing gum provided one of the three sources of the country's wealth. The shadows, already retreating downhill, hid too the cave entrances where hid the blind and milk-white fish whose bladders, used somewhere in the far cold North beyond the Holy Empire, places he could not even imagine, so cold must they be, to make more palatable the crude and horrid barley drink they swilled furled around their fires, that paid too well, so rare the fish, and best of all the stone horns of ancient beasts, one horn to each boulder-hard buried beast like the unicorn of legend, though squatter by far and less elegant, those, dug from the very caverns under Kraguj itself, and sold, so merchants said, in far Cathay, crushed into powder, to make old men virile again, a triple base of wealth like tripod for fireside cookpot kept them well, and made even Elizabeta endurable most of the time.

Westward down the long gorge, deep as ten arrowflights, and guarded by more towers along its crests, the river ran, down to the inland Nrvic Sea, on which alone was trade permitted, the merchants of the Serenissima and sometimes Argosides as well coming to the rafts where his men set their wares for sale. So rimmed by nature and by savages his state, none could enter save at his will ... and none ever did. And yet, today, his spy had come to say, three would ... three in one day. And even as he spoke, noted the bundle by the corner turret he had thought but a discarded sentry's cloak, as the sun touched it and him, began to stir.

Dagger out, he rushed to see ... and found, still soft-eyed with sleep, the girl wrapped in the bundle like a kitten seeking the warmest nest. At first he thought a sentry had smuggled his girlfriend in, to pass the nightwatches, and, taken unawares by the master's unexpected dawn arrival, panicked and hidden the girl as best he could.

But almost instantly he knew this could not be ... and not just by the girl's utter strangeness of face, an aspect of delicacy and foreignness none of these inbred mountaineers could ever wear. No - for, with a grimace at his own forgetfulness, he remembered how, but recently, fearful of treason, he had forbidden this highermost tower, lying as it did immediately above his own quarters, to any but himself - and of course Elizabeta.

Curse her. There was nowhere he could go that she did not insist on prying. But he had had all doors save the one that led from his own quarters to this tower sealed with heavy stones, and had, the night before, carefully locked that last door upwards from his own chambers ... indeed, had still in the pocket of his gown the self-same heavy key, and could, now, remember having unlocked the door, cursing the lock's stiffness, before beginning the climb to this viewpoint. So how came she here ... how ... how?

His mind churned with questions ... doubts ... the girl ... a Tatar perhaps, or Khwarezm ... even maybe a Cumanian? Witchcraft ... that was their skill ... and they it had been who had held Chastillon ... Yes ... she was the one, must be ... he would give the order ... now ... NOW ... why had he waited so long? His lips moved, and words began, echoing through the audience chamber ... echoing in his head as if it would split ... as if he were a horseshoe being beaten on the anvil ... and the words were not the simple command to Grenich he had planned ...

Nor were they in his voice, though he felt his lips moved and twisted, hauled by invisible ropes ... and the voice said:

"As I promised, so have I performed ... you know me well, do you not ... you remember my voice, men of the mountains of Kragujevac ... you remember how I saved you, led you, strengthened your resolve till you alone of all the mountaineers of Hum and Zeta and Hrvatzka were able to resist the coming of the locusts from the East, the sea-wolves of the West ... so that you alone, today, would be free were it not for this vulture and his she-jackal preying on your flesh ... do you not know me, now?"

Stiff the faces of the guard, unmoving the prisoners. Only the dwarf still smiled his twisted sneer. Lazaris tried to move his face, close his mouth, stop this noise. But it would not be stopped.

"Yes, you know me, though you show it not, for fear of some awful trick your upstart master plays ... no. I am wrong, not fear, for I know you of the mountain of Kraguj too well to believe fear is in your being ... but caution, wisdom, that surely keeps you still and silent ..."

A pause for ... for what? A sudden wind howling up from the gorge set the hangings fluttering wildly, and the ancient worn tapestry of the Martyrdom of St. Demetrios, loot from some long-ago raid upon the cities of the coast, split in two and fell in dusty heaps upon the floor. Yet still neither guard nor prisoners stirred, and Lazaris, for all his struggles, could not.

"Yes, you remember me ... Renald de Chastillon ... foreigner to you once, and then your leader to salvation ... and then lost to you ... lost because this treacherous worm, this Lazaris ... yes, the right name

for an evil thing crawled upward, like a foetor from a grave, an orphan of a gutter I took pity on in our sack of the camp of the sea-comers, when he clung so staunchly to my stirrup as we rode among their tents to burn and loot and scare them back on to their ships ... though I learn in horror that their merchants now hold your trade in their stranglehold these days ...

"Yes, adopted him, that saved changeling ... made him my squire, taught and trained and raised him ... and for what ... to crawl up her skirts, the skirts of your Elizabeta, your Countess, my wife and my reward for saving you. Crawled up her skirts and then into her mind like a nameless worm from a horrid grave ... until she connived in his plan ... tricked into a hunt, just him and her and me ... the ambush planned, and I, Renald, even my bowstring cut, my sword-blade blunted, fallen into the hands of the Cumanians, just as planned ...

"Only even those savages, though led by warlock priests, infidel wizards, devil-worshippers, still had more Christian courtesy than my Elizabeta and the creature Lazaris I had so unwisely made ... and would not take their pay to kill me, but instead set monstrous ransom ... ransom my kin, church-mice poor with but one broken tower to their name in the forests of Angoumois, could never meet. And who else cared? I, like you of Kragujevac, was a thorn in every side, Pope and Venetian, king and emperor, all glad to think me lost forever in the stepland's tents, drawn further and further away with each year into the vastnesses of the plains to be forgotten forever in lands where men have but one huge eye in their foreheads or carry their heads beneath their arms or live on mingled milk and blood of mares in lands eternally black and fires beneath the ice the only light that's ever seen except the dancing banners of the heroes dead and feasting still behind the Summer Circumpolar Stars ...

"Yes, and you, mountaineers, would gladly have saved me, had you known ... and had Lazaris and his whore not eaten up all the produce of this land for their own hidden treasury, and starved you dry ... But all is well again ... for as I promised when the Cumans seized me first, I have returned and you too shall be free this very day."

The voice ceased. The guard moved clumsily, as if stirring from sleep or trance, rubbing their faces as if needles pierced them for the blood's return.

Grenich stepped forward a pace, wearing an expression Lazaris could not clearly read ... but as he opened his mouth to speak, Lazaris, his tongue and lips his own again, forestalled him, trying to appear calm and controlled though his brain reeled ...

"So ... my trick has failed, though I thought it would cause one of the prisoners to reveal vital information in amaze. Never mind ... I have other ways of bringing them to utterance. Bind them, with chains, to the wall of my private solar, Grenich, you and these other two men to ensure their obedience. The rest of you, back to their posts."

As Grenich bound the three captives, his face spoke to Lazaris of divided loyalties. Lazaris halted him an instant as he went to leave the room. "This talk of Renald being alive and all these years awaiting ransom, and we unwilling to pay it ... a lie, merely a convenient fiction, to see if any of these three knew of him ... take no notice, Grenich, you and I and all the others of this mountain know Renald long an honoured corpse below the frontier peak whereon he fell so brave and so outnumbered, saving Elizabeta and, to my shame, making me leave with her to protect her rather than die beside him in futile combat ... and our marriage, as you know, his dying wish ..."

Grenich nodded and left ... but whether the nod one of agreement, or mere comprehension of what he had heard, Lazaris could not tell ... curse the stupid stolidity of these men, off-carvings of their own mountains they so often seemed, mere blocks of stupid stone, obedient or disobedient only as cliffs and avalanches are.

And now the prisoners must be dealt with ... Grenich later ... curse this day, would it never end ... not that there had been any peace at all since the spy. Why had he thrown the man through the window to his death on those rocks far below, just because he brought bad news. That three strangers would come to his kingdom, enter it against all the prohibitions brought in after Chastillon's capture to ensure against such a return ... for one of the three was Chastillon, this the spy swore, his ransom paid by parties unknown, and he had been heard to swear, on his arrival in Christendom from Cumania, that his first journey must be to Kragujevac with two friends to repay the kindness shown him by his wife and his friend and foster-child ... and then, Lazaris cursed himself, even before learning anything more he in his sudden rage and terror had disposed of the man, a screaming dwindling speck that ceased so far below. He could have - must have - known so much more ... gold ... torture ... between them they would have made the whole story clear, and Lazaris, forewarned, would have known just what to do ... do ... now. His dagger in his hand ...

The three, unmoved, facing him as apparently unaffected by their fetters and his flickering glittering blade as by a gentle breeze, a trickling shallow stream.

All three ... kill all three. Which first ... which ... The girl ... the witch ... she must be the one, so kill her quick before her spells could be aroused. Oh, but she was so lovely ... Perhaps, if he promised her Elizabeta's head on a silver plate, and half - well, nearly half - the treasure in the vaults below Castle Kraguj, she would protect him against Renald, against that voice which stole his mind ... perhaps ...

The dwarf that grinned so lightly, so disrespectfully ... him first, then? The Carmathian, stiff as ice ... a Northern beast ... the Renald-voice had spoken of the far North. The Carmathian ... it must be he ... he first ... but his strength, his imperviousness to local loyalty, to Elizabeta's blood-ties with the mountain people ... he could kill her for Lazaris ... save him, then, him ... kill the other two ...

In a fever of indecision Lazaris' knife jerked to and fro like a snake's darting tongue.

Faster, faster, hypnotic silver light as sun from water reflected through a window on to a wall it moved ... rippled ... drew his mind, his eyes ... his thoughts down a long tunnel of deepening light ... drowning ... drowning ... diving ... drowning ... fish leaping in a stream of thought, of images ... a child soaking wet in the gunnels of a great ship, left bundled while his mother pleasured weary oarsmen during their turn away from the rhythmic torment of the oars ... her neck ripe with jewelry after the fleet's first success ... the camp a sheet of fire, dark swordsmen looming on horseback ... a great figure he grabbed, clung to, his tiny self determined to take back a life for his mother's throat cut before his very eyes ... faster and faster the images ... the horseman's powerful arm grasping him ... the training to ride ... new clothes ... the mountains his home ... learning to use sword and knife, to hawk, to sing, to play the lute ... the woman the horseman loved ... the chance of revenge ... success ... his kingdom ... his safety ... the spy ... screaming ... falling ... three more spies ... strange spies ...

By land, by water, by air ... none yet by fire ... fire ... the blade a fire before his eyes ... Renald's voice, the giant horseman's voice, "Use it, little one, use it ..." the knife wrenched casually from his tiny hand, laughter, humiliatingly thrown over the saddlebow ... laughter ... the voice so near ... this time he would leave it to no little brown foreign savages to do his work ... this time he would do the job himself ... now, now he knew how to use a knife, had been well taught ... now he could forever stop that horrid mastering voice ... Renald's voice so gleefully, mockingly, urging him to strike.

It took only one stroke.

Choking on his own blood Lazaris' last conscious thought was that the great horseman had won again.

He had indeed silence Renald's voice - but only while it used Lazaris' own windpipe and tongue and lips to form itself.

And lay in the growing darkening pool before the three silent captives like a frieze carved out of stone, as the day darkened into evening and red far across the sea huge as a heart the sun went slowly down.

The captives dissolved back to the earth, the air, the water from which they were made, and in their going split the castle wide ... and in its riving, as other strings resound when one string on a lute is played, in curious sympathy, the mountains round about too opened wide.

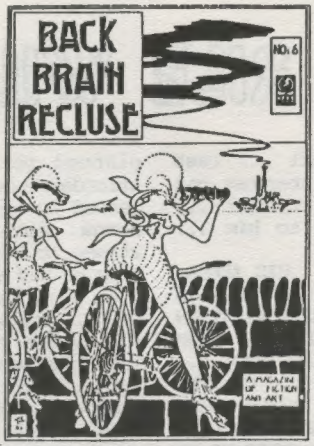
The blind fish were buried forever, and the stone unicorns were gone beyond ever again being found. The shifting of the mountains stopped the hidden waters, and the trees of terebinth all died. The falling rubble blocked the gorge, and sank the town, and all there left, led by the Captain Grenich, and, with what little treasure they had saved, went down to the sea and bought or stole ships and turned to piracy and against everyone was turned their hand who was not of the Kraguj mountain born.

Elizabeta cursed their going, but would not go with them, remaining instead in the last tower standing above the gathered flood, convinced until she starved, abandoned, that her power sometime somehow must return.

Far away past plain and mountain and more plain, more mountain, moss and forest and steppe and ice and mountain and more ice, throned in more furs than a whole herd of horned Lapp-beasts wear, upon a throne that sealed a frozen monstrous beast with curving tusks like giant ivory scimitars, amid the worship of a hundred tribes the shaman Renald sat and laughed to see his powers proved. The worshippers round him knew not why he laughed, nor ever saw the deeds his travelling spirit did upon the wind - but the laugh alone was terrible enough to see him ripely fed with tribute till these times should end.

THE END

BACK ISSUES



#5 : Steve Sneyd, Ray Jon, Breda Sweeney, John Light, Jon Daunt, Albert Russo, Andy Darlington, Don Webb, Matt Brooker, H.R. Felgenhauer, Sam Bayley, D'Israeli and Kaiser Bill.

#6 : Don Webb, Alan Stewart, Simon Clark, Michael Moorcock, SMS, Wayne Rile Williams, t. Winter-Damon, Anne Dyer, Mark Iles, Ray Jon, Matt Brooker and Kaiser Bill.

#7 : MICHAEL MOORCOCK SPECIAL ISSUE: Exclusive interview with Michael Moorcock, Jerry Cornelius stories by Steve Sneyd, Chris Reed and Andy Darlington, lyrics by Moorcock, artwork by SMS, Matt Brooker and Kaiser Bill.

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See page 4 for Overseas Prices.

NECROFETTI

WAYNE RILE WILLIAMS

Frank Dexter focusses The Gift ... Past memories ... pain/injustices, interpose his thoughts ... obscuring love/comfort ... Shock wave reverberating back to him ... Sweat breaks out on his brow ...

... MAN APPEARS BEFORE HIM ... HIS ZEBRA-STRIPED BODY, LYING PRONE ... DRIFTING IN MID-AIR ... HE HAS ONLY ROUGH APPROXIMATION OF HUMAN FACE ... HORN PROTRUDES FROM FOREHEAD ... HIS ABDOMEN SPLIT OPEN ... SILVER WORMS EATING INTO ORGANS ... CRYSTAL SPHERES FLOAT ABOVE HIM ... MANIFOLDLY REFLECTING HIS SCREAMS ... SPHERES BEGIN TO ... CLOUD WITH CRIMSON ... BLOOD WELLS UP IN THEM ... FALLING IN RAIN OF DROPLETS THAT STREAK DOWN ... FORMING WORDS ...

Dexter can feel worms empathetically wriggling on his flesh .., crawling into his eyes ... Warmth of blood falling on his face. He touches the man's wound ... looks at dripping red on his fingers ... can see man's chest rise and fall ... No hallucination ... the man was as real as he could make him.

His legs tingle/alter ... alive with swirling colours ... a cold fire running through them ... He tries to crawl away ... but The Gift holds him, filling him with inexplicable euphoria. He's lost friends/ wife ... His world has narrowed to The Gift ... Right now ... this seems unimportant ... Even childhood memories ... roaches in cereal boxes ... rats skittering in walls ... tenement smells ... garbage/garlic/body odour ... He'd hated it ... feared he'd never get out ... Tears of misery becoming tears of reasonless joy. He laughs ... Laughter echoes back to him ... floating in orgasmic transports of The Gift.

Through mental fog, he tries to remember again ... what it was like before it came to dominate his life ... Growing up ... kids wouldn't accept him ... He was different ... They had made fun of his ragged clothes/ colour of his skin ... Isolated ... didn't belong ... had started to despise them ... withdraw into himself .. What made them any better than he? Girls had little to do with him.

He had been thirty when he had met/married Doreen, a poetess. He had begun to open up then ... have friends. He and Doreen had planned to raise a family ... The Gift afforded them just enough money when supplemented by her royalty cheques to meet their needs. Within a year, it had grown too strong to resist ... It was jealous of the time he had spent with others ...

He had left Doreen, one night as she slept, pregnant with their first child ... His house receding into the distance ... into the past ... Half way down the block ... a light had appeared in the bedroom window ... Doreen's shifting silhouette had been visible ... He wanted to go back ... crawl into their warm bed ... fall asleep listening to sounds of her breathing ... it had guided his feet away.

He isn't aware of beginning again ... but The Gift begins to leech his memories ... using/transforming them ... Swirl of colours crawling over his arm ... frigid pain growing electric there ... like glacier, flaming ice ... pain increasing ...

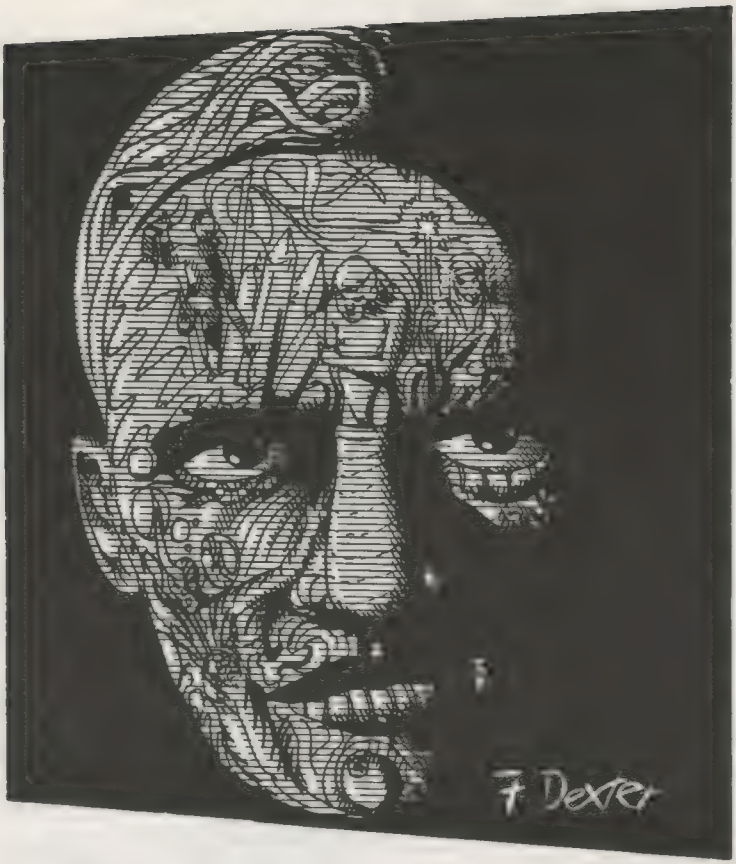
Most of his early memories ... have lost emotional content ... things like ... death of both parents in car accident ... The Gift probes deeper ... finds ... the war ... was conscious objector ... Made him do public service ... hospital ... burn ward ... They knew he vomited every time he went in there ... hearing screams of patients in hydro-baths ... smell of scorched flesh/ disinfectant ... ruined faces ...

"Why do you make me remember? ... Why?" his memories funnel through The Gift ... are translated into ...

HERMAPHRODITE ... FORMING BEFORE HIM ... NUDE ... FEMININE ... EXCEPT FOR VESTIGIAL ORGAN ... FACE, PATCHWORK BROWN/BLACK/WHITE SKIN ... HE/SHE PRODUCES EBONY SAW ... BEGINS TO CUT INTO ONE OF 'HER' SMOOTH LEGS ... JAGGED METAL TEETH RIPPING MULTIHUED FLESH ...

Dexter feels ecstasy of 'her' pain emphatically ... saw seeming to rend his leg ... Sinking feeling like sliding down razor blade incline ... elevator sensation in his stomach ...

'SHE' HOLDS SEVERED LEG ... USING IT AS A STYLUS ... WRITING A NAME IN THE AIR ... LETTERS IRRIDESCENT ... RAINBOW PATTERN FORMS AT 'HER' SIDE ... ENDING IN ERRATIC CRYSTAL FORMATION ...



Undulating colours spreading to Dexter's remaining arm ... chest ... His body warm/tingling ... Everything out of focus ... difficult ... to think ... Gift working on his mind ... just as it had been a year ago ... He is plummeting into country of dreams ... down unconscious avenues ... Remembering ... year ago ...

He had been disoriented ... tried to break away from The Gift ... It was like an addiction ... offering surcease ... painful withdrawal if unused ... Destroying him mentally/physically ... but unlike drug ... images, it allowed him to produce ... didn't fade in morning's light ... but lingered ... forming lasting psychological epitaphs ... He had been staggering beneath midnight stars ... night streets, uneven ... He was conspicuous ... negroid features/albino skin ... Gang had gathered around him ... He'd fought ... there were too many ... Had felt the knife in his side ... back ... cutting tendons in his hand ...

In hospital, doctor had checked Frank's occupation on chart ... frowned, examining his hand, "Sorry, you'll have only limited dexterity now." ... Speaking in between hospital room silences ... The Gift, "You won't need it ... you have me."

SOMETHING MATERIALISES BEFORE HIM NOW ... DEFORMED BOY EMERGES FROM BROKEN VASE ... HIS NEWSPRINT-TATTOOED BODY'S OUTLINES CONFORM PERFECTLY TO VESSEL'S SYMMETRY ... LEPER ARISES ... DRESSED IN SYMBOL-STUDDED ROBE ... TOUCHES BOY'S SIDE WITH GLOWING STAFF ... MULTICOLOURED INTESTINES SPILL OUT ... ARRANGING ITSELF INTO WORDS ...

Dexter smells sweet odour of decay/his acrid sweat ... feels entrails dissolving ... His torso/head illumines with pulsating colours ... colours spinning off one by one ... until his body is transparent pupa ...

alive with swarming stars, which lessen in magnitude ... wink out .. leaving behind nothing ... Dexter's essence becoming highlight/shadow falling on grotesquerie he has created ... and ...

Robert Tilford puts down his brush ... looks at the mural he has restored, an authentic Dexter, entitled "Necrofetti" ... The artist's last work ... painted just before his disappearance.

Dexter was a strange man ... claimed he needed neither paint/brushes to produce his paintings ... used a psychokinetic ability he called 'The Gift' ... in fact, x-rays of his art had revealed no discernible brush-strokes ...

The mural is a moray, picture within a picture ... viewed one way, it is a depiction of the horrific ... viewed another way ... the shadows of the mutilated fall together to form ... Dexter's self-portrait. Restoration has taken months. Tilford takes off his glasses ... rubs his eyes ... Odd ... if you stare at the figures on the painting long enough ... They seem to move ... shadows shift ... and if you listen hard enough ... on quiet nights like this ... you can almost hear ... a ... scream.

THE END

interzone

No 19 Spring 1987

Original fiction by:

Neil Ferguson
Paul J. McAuley
Kim Newman
Christina Lake
Richard Kadrey
S.M. Baxter

Illustrated by:

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Interview with Gwyneth Jones

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moon

It was at night that I first saw her, standing in a grass covered clearing near the top of Lion Rock, Kowloon. I'd been an insomniac for many years and had taken the habit of a long stroll in the dark hours.

She stood quite still, gazing up at the heavens. On one side of the clearing Golden Bamboo stretched its way to the sky, their long willow-like leaves waving and rustling in the cool breeze. I shuddered and was grateful for my light jacket and gloves.

Chinese Red Palms, so often seen in oriental paintings, added a strange kind of serenity to the scene, and somehow the autumn night and clear sky impelled me to speak to her.

"Jo-san," I said, good morning in Cantonese.

"Oh, you made me jump!" she gasped. "Jo-san."

It was my turn to be surprised: despite the girl being of slight build and having dark hair, she was obviously a gweilo, a european. I then did a typical thing and peered up at the sky, following her example.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

She chuckled. "Actually I'm moon watching."

"Rather late in the year for that, isn't it?"

I'd read quite a bit about this ancient Chinese custom, and seen children several years running, carrying lamps to the tallest hills around, where they spent the entire night studying the moon and eating moon cakes and other goodies. It was such a widely accepted practice that the Hong Kong government had made the following day a bank holiday, to allow the children time to rest.

But I knew that the festival was held in late September, and it was now approaching Christmas.

The girl was shaking her head. "It's not really late; my people have been doing this for thousands of years, before your race even existed."

"Pardon?" I said in a stunned voice, thinking that perhaps she had escaped from somewhere, and beginning to feel just a little scared.

"Something made you speak to me," she said. "When that happens we tell our story. But first ..."

She touched me, lightly, on the cheek.

I gasped at the shocking feel of her icy

MADNESS

Mark Nes

skin on mine, and the fact that she had no little finger, and no nails.

She smiled.

"You see, we aren't human at all, and only came here by accident a long, long time ago. There was a collision you see, and despite our efforts the ship I was on crashed. We lost touch with the other vehicle but believe that it was forced to land here too. All the males in my group were killed." She paused as a cloud obscured the moon, and continued only when it had passed.

"Legend has it that we'll meet our males again under the moonlight. So we come here to watch and wait, and whenever males of your species ask what we're doing we tell them."

"Why?"

She touched me on the cheek again. I shuddered and moved away, filled with sadness at the look of resigned disappointment on her face.

"Now you can see why we don't mate with your people, although it's said that our males should be able to. Maybe one day ..."

The girl sighed and turned her pretty face up to the moon once more, ignoring me, as if she hoped I'd go away.

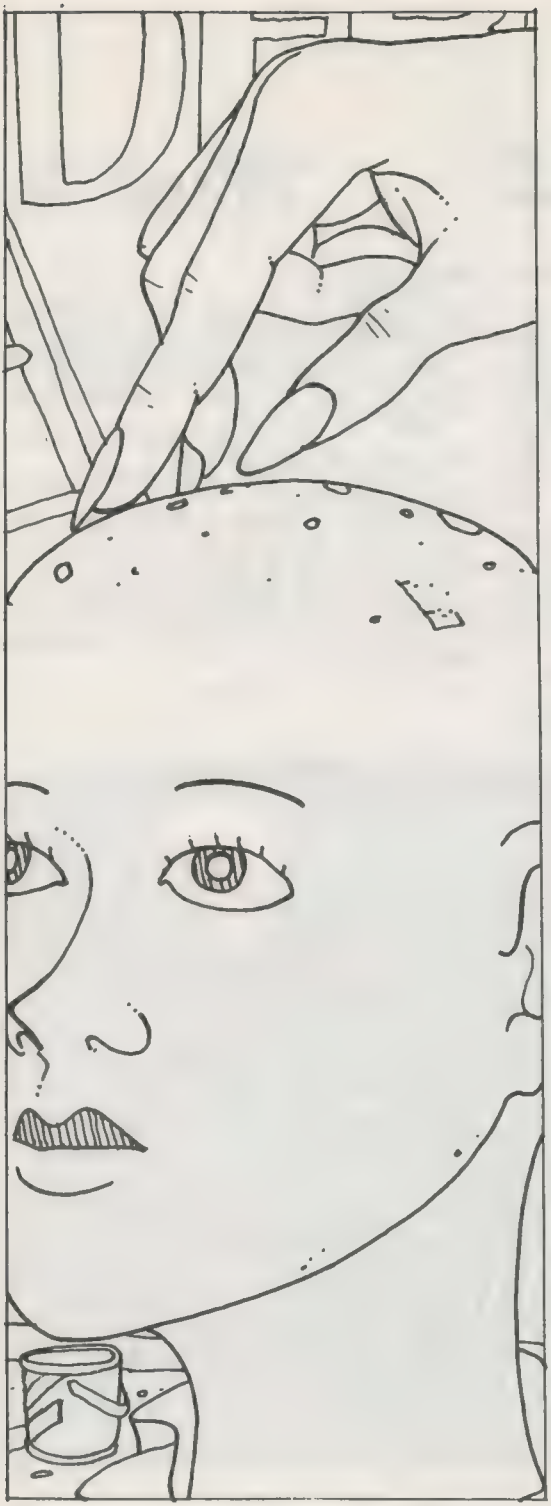
"Well," I stammered, "time's getting on and I must be off. Goodbye."

She never answered, nor turned her head, as I walked away.

I've seen her several times since, standing there, looking so lonely upon that hilltop, staring up at the moon.

And each time I plunge my hands into my pockets, to hide the three fingers with no nails, and wonder, like all orphans must, about my father.

THE END



SHOP WINDOW GIRL

Shop window girl,
A clear panel
Keeps us apart,
But that does not stop
An invisible pigeon
From carrying your warmth
Across the road.
Six times this morning,
I have walked
Down the high street
To receive a parcel,
And the jewellers
Has become my second home.
If only you could
Feel the excitement
Inside my body,
And the anticipation
That returns your smiles,
But you are
A shop window girl,
And I am afraid
Of breaking the glass.

Ray Jon

MUSIC TO THE EARS

John Light

Elby woke to a gentle but cheering tune on muted strings. He rose, showered and dressed. From his window he could see far down into the bowl of the city. His room was situated up near the outer rim. The diameter of the bowl was so great that Elby could rarely see to the centre, let alone the other side. Today, however, the sun was shining, and he could see the tiers of rooms descending in giant steps towards the central stadium.

The music in his room became louder, as the strings gave way to woodwind. Soon he knew it would turn to blinding brass, driving him out of the cubicle and on his way to work. He quickly collected his papers together, found his hearing plugs and pushing them in, stepped outside. As he walked along the corridor, his earphones played a lively march and he was at the lift sooner than he'd expected.

When the car arrived, he entered and dropped fifty-three floors to the work area. Leaving the elevator he boarded the walkway, a gay tune filling his ears. Other people moved on the travelator, but they hardly noticed each other. Sometimes Elby had wondered if they all heard the same music, or if people listened to different sounds. But there was no way of finding out. It was impossible to speak to a person wearing hearing plugs and Elby had never seen anybody without them. He took his own out only in his own room, where the walls wrapped him round with suitable music. At work he communicated visually using his computer terminal keyboard and television monitor. If anybody had anything to say to him it was relayed via the visual display units.

Elby worked hard all morning. He was a farmer. He controlled the vats where yeast protein was grown. He very rarely had anything to do. To his questions about how things were going in each of the tanks under his control, the monitor almost invariably displayed the legend "Nothing to report". Occasionally a fault would be reported, usually followed by a laconic "Appropriate action taken - situation returning to normal".

Only once had he had to make a decision. A batch of yeast had become infected by a wild strain. This occurred from time to time and the computer had to decide whether to eradicate the wild strain selectively or scrap the lot and start again. The decision was taken on the basis of which would require the least energy expenditure. On the occasion in question, the alternatives made equal energy demands and the computer found itself unable to make a choice. Elby hardly thought about it. If the computer couldn't discriminate between the two, what did it matter what course was followed? He tapped out "Restart" and that was that.

At midday, Elby left his terminal and walked down the corridor to the refectory, where he ate his lunch to a relaxing melody. The afternoon passed as had the morning. He returned home and sat looking through his window while the room played vaguely melancholy music, followed by a cheerful selection and finally a lullaby. Elby retired to his couch and slept soundly. Occasionally he would wake during the night. There was always soothing music playing and he would soon drift off to sleep again.

One morning Elby awoke with the feeling that something was wrong. For a moment he struggled to identify the cause of his uneasiness - then it came to him. There was no music. He was being hammered with silence. It smote his eardrums with almost physical pain. His first thought was that he had gone deaf. But when he moved from his couch, he knocked the earplugs off the bedside table and heard them drop to the carpet with a dull plop. He stooped, picked them up and rammed them into his ears.

Nothing.

No sound.

No music.

Silence.

He pulled the hearing plugs out and flung them across the room. They struck the wall with a thud and fell to the ground. Silence followed. Elby felt himself losing control. He couldn't stand the silence, a noise, any noise would be better he thought.

When he heard the sobbing, he knew he was wrong. The sound of human distress was worse than silence. It came through the wall of his room. Long heart-rending sobs. He must stop them. He hit the wall with his fist. There was a gasp, silence, and then the weeping began again.

Elby opened the door of his room and walked to the door of the next. He had never entered another room on this corridor. Nor had he seen any of the inmates. They left

for work at different times he supposed. He pressed the button on the door and waited. Nothing happened. When the button was pressed, it normally interrupted the music inside the room with a special recognition signal. That too must be out of order. He rapped on the door with his knuckles. From the corridor he couldn't hear the sobbing. Perhaps it had stopped. Elby banged on the door with his fist. The door swung open at the first blow. Elby looked in.

The room was almost identical to his own. The colour scheme was different and there were odds and ends scattered about rather untidily. Sitting on the couch was a girl. Elby could see she had been crying from the tear stains on her cheeks.

Elby mouthed some words but no sound came. He had been taught to speak at school in case of emergency. Now the emergency had come and he didn't seem able to use his learning. He moistened his mouth with his tongue and tried again.

"I'm from the next room."

The girl stared.

"That way," said Elby, pointing.

The girl said nothing. Elby was finding it easier to say things now that he had started.

"It's a shock," he went on, "that the music has stopped."

The girl nodded.

Encouraged, Elby continued.

"It's never happened before. Once it did go slightly wrong. I woke up and set off for work in the middle of the night before I realised it was still dark and something must have malfunctioned."

The girl smiled. Elby was overcome. Not since he was a child had he elicited a response from another person. Never before had he seen such a smile, a spontaneous, meaningful smile; not the inane contortion of a face controlled by music. He would give anything to see her smile again, but he could think of nothing more to say.

"Smile again," he implored eventually.

The girl complied but it was strained and unnatural. Desperately Elby racked his brain for something else to say.

"I heard you crying," he said. "That's why I came in. You're not crying now. Are you feeling better?"

The girl's mouth opened. She struggled and then she spoke - a single word. "Yes."

Elby blundered on, ideas and phrases rusty from non-use rose from his subconscious.

"My name's Elby; what's yours?"

"Satina," replied the girl.

"That's a beautiful name," said Elby; he hesitated, and then added, "for a beautiful girl."

Satina looked at the floor. A blush rose to her cheeks. Elby was confused. It was so difficult to know what to say. Nobody ever spoke these days, not since he was a child, or if they did, then not to him. Satina seemed unused to speech also.

"You don't see children about any more," sighed Elby. To his surprise this apparently mournful remark was rewarded with a smile more delightful than the first. Suddenly Satina seemed to have mastered her tongue.

"Of course there are children," she said, "but they're in the nursery, as we were until we grew up."

Elby looked interested.

"Have you seen them?" he asked.

"Yes, I work there."

"But with them growing up all the time, aren't they getting fewer and fewer?"

Satina laughed. It was a sound whose beauty was quite unconnected with music.

"Of course not. When a child becomes an adult and leaves the nursery, a new baby arrives in a bottle."

"Where does it come from?" enquired Elby.

Satina shrugged.

"I don't know. I've never thought about it."

"What do you do in the nursery?"

"I watch the children, show them how to use their earplugs, and how to use the speech machine. And sometimes I assist at a birth."

"What's 'birth'?" asked Elby.

"It's what the mother computer calls taking a baby from its bottle. When it arrives it lives in the bottle until the mother computer says it's time to be born. Then the bottle goes into a machine where the baby is removed. When it comes out it's often unhappy at leaving the mother computer. I comfort it."

"How do you do that?" Elby was fascinated by this glimpse of an unknown world, lost with the memory of his own childhood, visible but dimly through the music-laden years.

"I slip its first earplugs in, and hold it close to me. They like being held close. I thought at first it was the ear plugs that comforted them. They play such sweet music. But then I found it was being held close that stopped them crying. I don't know why." Elby was about to tell Satina about his own work; but what was it compared with hers? Dull, lifeless, useful no doubt but totally devoid of personal interest.

At this moment a soft voice filled the room.

"This is your computer speaking. There is a fault in the music banks. Everybody is asked to stay at home until the fault is put right. This should not be long."

"There, I knew it," said Elby, "everything will soon be back to normal."

"Will you be glad?" asked Satina.

Elby looked at her - and realised that he would not. The music stopping was the best thing that had ever happened to him; the only thing.

"It needn't make any difference," he said. "Now that we know each other, we could still talk."

Satina looked at him, and he could see disbelief in her eyes, and knew it was but a reflection of his own.

"Perhaps they won't find the fault." But he didn't believe that either. "Tell me more about the nursery," he pleaded, his voice urgent with the newly felt consciousness of time passing.

"It's filled with the most soothing and beautiful music," answered Satina.

"As beautiful as laughter?" asked Elby, surprised and a little embarrassed at his own question.

"I don't know," replied Satina. "The children laugh, I can see their mouths open but I can't hear them because of my own ear plugs."

"Couldn't you take them out?"

Satina looked shocked.

"That would be the most terrible manners. And such a bad example to the children. I'm sure I would lose my job if I ever did that."

Elby rose and walked over to the window. Despite the computer's request there were people in the streets, gathered in little groups, gesticulating, talking clumsily; he could sense it despite the distance. Then he saw a change come. The groups broke up, people drifted away at first, then began to move more purposefully. Elby understood. Desperately he turned from the window ...

... just as sound flooded into the room. It was a harsh blaring brass. That meant he was late for work. Where were his ear plugs? He looked around. He hardly saw Satina who already had her own plugs fitted and was collecting her things for the day. Dimly he remembered that this was not his home. He moved out into the corridor to his own room, where the brass blared louder than ever. Gratefully he scooped up his ear plugs and pushed them home. A brisk march replaced the discordant trumpets and heaving a sigh of relief Elby set off for the elevator, hardly seeing the people moving ahead, behind and on either side of him. He didn't recognise Satina in the lift and didn't notice when she got out.

THE END

The Pit and the Pendulum

Instructions and ideas
written in the dust,
the hard harsh silica
of their leader's ideals
that bite into the brain,
cough now and hurl
their violent phlegm
into the face of reason.
The scabs have left,
cannot heal such sores,
and there is nothing
to hold back the scum
which believes in total
putriescence of control
by the lowest intellect.

The pit is ready dug,
the pendulum has its noose.

Geoff Stevens

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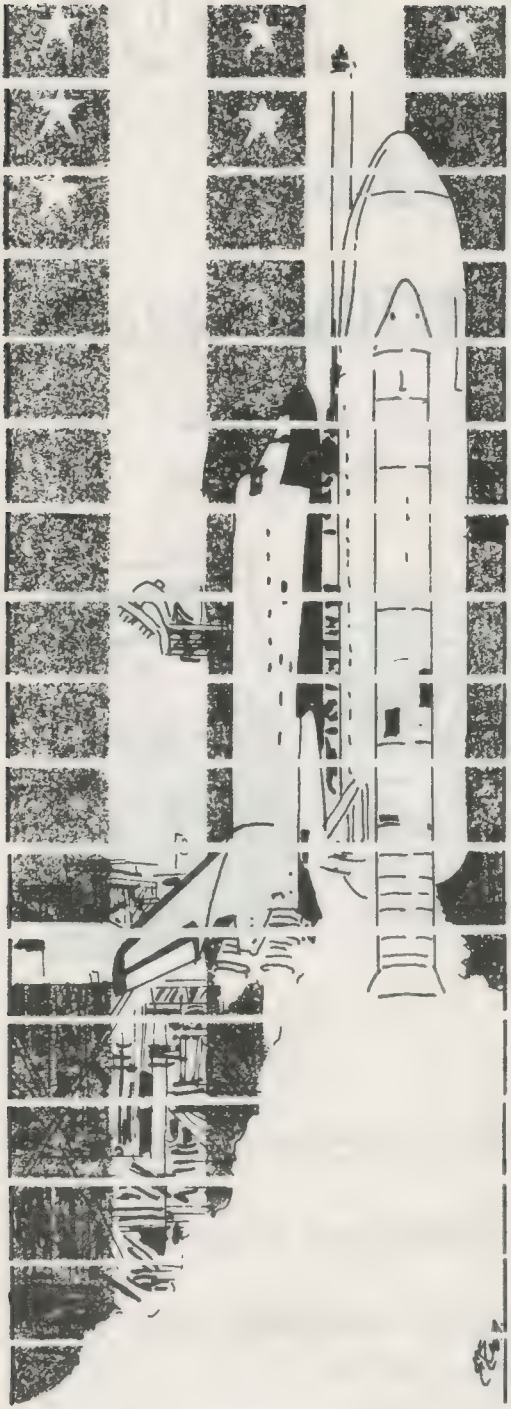


GRO
SUN
WAYNE AL

Her name was Pamela and they had met at the Superbowl Champions Bears party on Rush Street the night before; she was built like a burlap bag filled with bobcats, as his grandfather would say, and made love like a Bengal tiger. Too horny and hungover to report for work the next morning, the 28th of January, he spent the morning humping the bobcat/tiger whose last name he didn't even know, and afterwards, rolling over on his right side, his foot brushed over the remote control of the RCA television, clicking it to life, and that was how McCallum heard about the shuttle accident.

Their flesh still touched. Pamela sighed once and lit up a Virginia Slims as the picture blinked twice. Tom Brokaw was speaking in a sombre tone. McCallum, startled at hearing the anchorman's voice instead of Pat Sajak and the Wheel of Fortune, cursed the television's slowness at warming up. Something was up. He glanced at the time: 10:39 a.m.

Was there an incident in Libya? Another plane hijacked? Damn terrorists, he thought, remembering the crippled man from Manhatten who was shot on the Achilles Loro last June and thrown overboard. His pulse raced.

Beside him, oblivious as a dog being taken to the pound, Pamela picked up the TV Guide and stifled a yawn with lacquered fingertips. Her nipples were taut in the winter coldness of the apartment, but McCallum didn't notice. She ruffled the pages noisily.

"... there does not seem to be a chance that anyone could have survived. The explo-

...ND
...TROL

...EW SHUTTLE

sion was that of a small nuclear blast ..." The scene was one of a calm blue body of water. Damn that Quadafi, McCallum thought darkly, what was going to happen ... no. The shuttle.

It was the shuttle, it exploded ... he didn't need pictures, he knew it with a sureness that was like embalming fluid coarsing through his veins. And then, when the picture was replayed for those who had just tuned in, he clamped his eyes shut so strongly his temples trobbed.

Oh good christ oh good christ running over and over through his brain.

When he opened his eyes an eternity later, he was hostage to a scene of the seven, and there was Christa McAullife the school teacher from New Hampshire, waving, smiling, not knowing about their impending disintegration. After the explosion, there was nothing left. Nothing came back down.

(ashes to ashes)
(bunk to bunkie)

Nothing came back down. McCallum looked at the framed picture above the fireplace mantel: a photograph of Chicago taken by Skylab in 1976, given to him by his cousin Denise the week before. She had been wearing a tan "I Want To Go" space shuttle t-shirt that day. But Christa, shit it was like waking up last summer to hear Samantha Smith had died in a plane crash in Maine.

"Robin Williams is on David Letterman tomorrow, baby," Pamela said enthusiastically.

McCallum ignored her, again watching the replay of the fireball which consumed the

safe blue of the television screen. Even then, he knew that image would scar him forever, as did the pictures of the remains of the woman who jumped out of the John Hancock building in 1971, pictures his dad had brought home from the precinct.

The girl punched him lightly in the shoulder and repeated herself.

"Leave me alone," McCallum spoke quietly. "Jesus Christ! Doesn't this -" he waved at the television, now showing a morbid replay of the New Hampshire schoolkids watching in horror as their innocence was stripped from their souls "- mean anything at all to you?!"

"You're the only one I care about right now," she purred, a very sickening sound. In context, McCallum heard it as a death rattle.

Five minutes had passed.

McCallum realised with horror that he had an erection. He grabbed a pillow and pressed it against his crotch. He was in no mood for any more games. The shuttle

(we know Major Tom's a junkie)

it finally happened. Back when the Columbia first took off, when he was still at the University of Illinois, McCallum had expected something like this to happen

(strung out on heaven's high)

but why (he knew this was a ghoulish thought, but it rang true just the same) did we have to lose Christa McAullife? Why not another astronaut, one who knew the risks? Why not a bimbo like the one next to him, her sweat still fresh in his throat?

He stared for many moments, blonde hair cascading down her perfect back, down the shadows of her spine to the crack of her firm, cellulite-free buttocks. And all of this meant nothing to her! Christ!

Maybe it was him, though. Maybe he did take things more seriously than others, even his roommates; was it any reason to persecute others?

He had cried during the episode of **Hill Street Blues** where Harry Garibaldi was gutted and died, but not until he had seen J.D. LaRue battle his guilt in the bathroom of the Kubiak Lounge.

Guilt.

McCallum had guilt well up in the drainage pipe that was his gut, dribbling over the edges with a maddening slowness. He fully understood why he had the erection; unbidden as it had come, like a friendless co-worker, it was still hanging around (no pun intended, McCallum thought wickedly).

He had an erec- he had a hard-on, awright awready - because he had just watched the perfect way to die. Quick and sure, blasted across the heavens for all to see. A bang,

not a whimper.

The dumb blonde next to him was a whimper personified. Why the fuck did he even bring her home with him? Right, right, his roommates were in San Diego, yada yada yada. But he couldn't even remember what bar he had met her in. If it was even a bar. For all he knew, he could have met her on the Englewood/Howard line.

Scattered in the stratosphere. What a trip that would be. McCallum remembered a recent episode of **St. Elsewhere**, one of the shuttle astronauts was under psychiatric care because he said that during the next trip, he would walk with God. In a dream, the last words the astronaut heard were: "You are dead now."

The last words the Challenger Seven heard were "full throttle".

Mercifully, the television now showed the White House conference room, in all its sterile innocence. Larry Speakes was telling America that President Reagan was postponing his State of the Union address for one week because of the disaster.

"Good." Pamela made a statement.

"What?" McCallum was actually thinking What The Fuck Is Going To Come Out Of Her Mouth Now?

"I mean, good, now I can watch that movie about the Mafia princess without having to stay up all night. I forget who plays her, but she's my favourite actress. One of them, anyways." She shrugged her shoulders.

"Who needs to know about bad news all the time, anyways." Again, it wasn't a question.

Thunderclouds formed behing McCallum's eyes. He felt like popping her one. He needed control

(Ground Control to Major Tom)

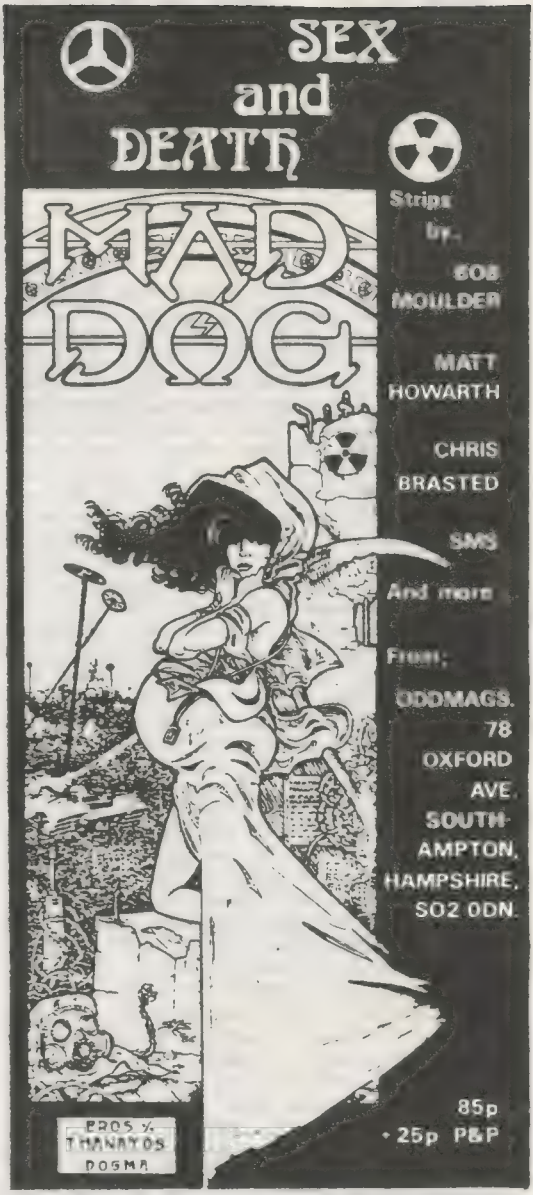
Depressed, saddened, frightened. McCallum stood, naked, half-erect like the flags downtown would be the next morning, walked to the south windows, stared.

Pamela padded into the kitchen. Turned on the blender to make orange juice; one of the few things he knew she liked. The blades came to life.

McCallum stared out at the tranquil blue of Lake Michigan meeting the cloudless horizon. Blue upon blue. He shut out the sounds of the birds outside the window, the sounds of the television, even the sound of his own breathing.

But he could not shut out of his mind the sound of the Sunbeam blender in the kitchen. The whirring, incessant and maddening, reminded him of a Coast Guard chopper off the coast of Florida, conducting a futile search for survivors.

THE END



MR MEPHISTO

Paul Roland

Mr Mephisto always spent his Saturday afternoons in the public library. It was one of the few pleasures in his otherwise colourless existence. A portly, balding, ruddy-faced little man in his early fifties, Albert Mephisto found solace in the reverent hush of Kentish Town's one intellectual amenity. The library offered temporary sanctuary from the outside world, his demeaning office job, his nagging sister and whining bed-ridden mother. For an hour or so each Saturday Albert would find solace in the occult section, running his fingers along cracked and mottled spines as if divining for knowledge. More often than not he would find it, behind such titles as Astrology and Napoleon, Cataclysm and Catharsis (he never did finish that one) or Mystic and Pagan Rites. Sometimes the title alone would excite him, but more often than not it was the publisher's introduction on the flyleaf promising 'secrets lost to man since time immemorial'. Albert's dull grey eyes would skip the author's biographical preface, his or her educational history, family details and so on but seldom their intriguing qualifications. What, he wondered, went into obtaining a degree in post-pagan theosophy or Rune reading? And where were the University of Black Arts and Parapsychology of America and the Institute of Astrological Science?

In addition to discovering new and inviting titles or rediscovering familiar favourites Albert found pleasure in the solitude of browsing. In all his years of loyal attendance he never encountered anyone on his side of the shelves. The elderly women with whom his neighbourhood abounded tended to congregate at the far end near the big gas boiler where the crime thrillers and historical romances were kept. Men generally stuck to a separate reference room where they were able to spread the daily papers before them unmolested by their women-folk and without having to dip into their pockets, while the old men seldom bothered with the pretence of choosing a book, preferring to stake their claim on one of the several split cushion armchairs with a bulging shopping bag, intent on sleeping the afternoon away.

This afternoon with Christmas only a fortnight hence Albert had found the library even more deserted than usual. He hadn't had to peer round the corner to shush anyone in the oversize section, as he had the week before. And this afternoon he'd come away with several items on demonology which promised to satisfy his voracious appetite for sensation. The string bag threatened to give way under the strain as he made his way along the high street. Each terraced house had once shunned him with its drawn blinds or taunted him with firelight and voices from within, but Albert's new interest had made him impervious to pain.

Yes, 1927 had had its compensations but he felt certain that the New Year would bring total fulfillment. His optimism was, however, shortlived.

He mounted the ill-lit stairs to his rooms breathless and cursing whichever tenant had left the bicycle behind the front door. Albert hung his coat in the hallway and peered around the living room door where his mother and sister were listening intently to the wireless. Inspector Thornby had gathered his suspects in the dining room and was just warming up when Mother began coughing.

"Close that door," demanded Edna, his puffy faced sister, "don't you know the draught is bad for her?" Albert slunk sullen-faced into the kitchen cursing his ill-fortune, his sister, his mother, banal radio serials and that damn bicycle to the accompaniment of his mother's coughing, his sister's slaps on the back and Inspector Thornby's final triumph.

Once he'd turned on the gas fire Albert examined his literary horde by the dim kitchen table lamp. It was indeed an impressive collection and one which he secretly wished would have a similar effect on his sister if she looked in on him before bed, but he knew that was too much to hope for.Edna had always despised him, while their mother was too far gone to think of him as anything other than her little boy. Both had been pleased when he was promoted from junior to assistant clerk, but then that had given Edna an extra two shillings a

week. Unfortunately mother's condition had worsened a week or two later and the doctor's bills had whittled away not only his raise but the greater part of his paltry savings account. But it wasn't just his sorry financial state nor his dull job nor even the disdain with which Edna regarded him that weighed so heavily on his mind. No, try as he might to deny it Albert eventually had to admit that his entire life had been a series of missed opportunities and ill luck.

In his final year at school he'd failed to obtain a qualifying certificate due to a nervous stomach complaint while during his first few years at Merchason's he'd twice been passed over for promotion in favour of ex-Grammar schoolboys. And of course mother fell ill on the day he went for the interview for the opening in head office. Yes, Albert Mephisto was fated to be a failure. But surely with his superior intellect and knowledge of the black arts he could yet make his mark. Surely there was still time to assert himself. Yes, he'd make them all sit up wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Mother might be too far gone to appreciate it fully but certainly Edna would have to acknowledge his genius and Mr. Merchason would have to make him a partner forthwith. With his command of the black arts and occult sciences the firm would go from strength to strength, gobbling up its rivals in a series of city-shaking coups.

But how was he to demonstrate this power, to convince them of its frightening potential? And then it came to him, just as the meter began its hollow metallic coughing and the lights flickered their last. He would command the library's entire collection of books to spontaneously combust - to catch alight and blacken rapidly to ashes. All except the occult section of course. This would spare him a supply of reading material whilst demonstrating an awesome degree of control. At that moment the meter expired and he found himself in darkness.

All the while as he prepared for bed Albert delighted in his plan. The more he ran it through his mind the more convinced he became that it was the most perfect he could have devised. As he lay in bed gazing through the small attic window at the moonlight rooftops he embroidered on it. He would begin with the historical romances and he chuckled to himself as he pictured the first flames licking the scented pages of Flames of Desire, a novel Edna had read at least three times. Yes, that would be a delicious irony and a nice humourous touch.

Albert's dreams were, as might be expected, a riot with fire, smoke and startling newspaper headlines. He also saw Edna with a mixture of fear and surprise on her face and Mr Merchason with a quivering, faint-hearted smile inviting him to try a plush new swivel office chair above which hung a portrait of himself smoking a very long cigar.

All of Sunday and the following week Albert walked two feet off the ground, coming down to earth only on Friday night having adopted the title 'Mr. Mephisto, the Devil's Right Hand Man.' Such was his confidence by this time.

Came Friday night he could not sleep. He turned over and over in bed wrestling with the incantation which he had devised and which he felt sure would bring him success. He breakfasted early that Saturday morning and then once he'd collected the necessary items for the ceremony and given Edna an uncharacteristically civil farewell he left for the library.

It was half past ten when he walked through the swing doors. A modest number of people were already engaged in choosing, low brows by the look of them. Passing out of sight behind the tall shelves of the occult section Albert riffled through his shopping bag and brought out a small piece of white chalk, a candlestick, a black candle and a box of Swan Vestas. He drew a circle all the way around the cabinet but even when on the other side nobody interfered. Everyone was engrossed in their own little world. After drawing a few symbols in this first circle Albert seemed satisfied. He then marched into the centre of the reference section where he drew a smaller circle, again with a number of runes and symbols, and then stepped into it. One or two readers looked up from their studies and watched him with interest. The next step before the ceremony proper could begin was the lighting of the candle and sealing of the circle. This Albert did just as he had rehearsed it in his mind and pictured in his dreams. Then he began to chant. He didn't possess a very tuneful voice and before long two or three matronly ladies had complained to the head librarian about the noise. By this time a small crowd had gathered. Albert was just getting into his stride when the crowd parted to reveal a rather vexed head librarian.

"What do you think you're up to?" said the librarian, drawing on his most starched and official tone.

Albert stopped and, addressing the crowd as a whole, he announced: "I am Mr. Mephisto, the Devil's Right Hand Man, and to prove my claim I have summoned the lower elementals to rend these books aflame on my command."

There was an audible gasp from the crowd

and a chuckle from a small boy at the front whose mother then clipped on the ear, causing him to burst into tears.

"Now!" cried Mr. Mephisto, raising his hands to the ceiling and looking upward. Everyone else looked upward too which was rather pointless as no books were kept on the ceiling and they, after all, were the target of his demonstration.

"Now!" bellowed Mr. Mephisto again, a hint of desperation in his command. Nothing happened. "N ..." His third plea was cut short as the head librarian snapped on hand on the charlatan's collar and the other on the seat of his pants, at the same time propelling the protesting little man towards the swivel doors. The crowd followed eagerly, barely suppressing their amusement as Mr. Mephisto, Kentish Town's very own necromancer was forcibly ejected from their public library. Sitting in a daze of disbelief and a pool of dirty rain water Mr. Mephisto watched as the mocking crowd turned and marched back into the library. It was all he could do to suppress a tear.

Before the weekend was out Albert had packed his suitcase and himself off to Europe. He'd left a note for Edna and mother but felt it was worthless as the story would soon reach them, no doubt much embroidered upon, through the delivery boy, a neighbour or Mrs. Reeves in the grocers. Either way he was sunk and exile was the only way out.

And that was the last they heard of Mr. Mephisto, save for a short letter which Edna received early in the New Year. It was dated Munich January 29th, 1928, and read as follows;

Dear Edna & Mother,

You will have heard of the events which led to my leaving England, to which I can add nothing.

I have been fortunate, however, finding employment and reasonable lodgings here in Germany. I have a new interest now - Politics - and have joined a new political party where I am treated with respect and often asked for advice. We are all of a like mind and I feel sure my future is here. Fate has been kind to me at last.

Enclosed is a photograph taken with my new friends. That is me in the middle of the front row with my arms around the two guiding lights of the party, Herr Goering and Herr Hitler.

Happy New Year,
Yours,
Albert.

THE END

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SPIT STARS SHAVE STRIPES

Negotiations start friendly, get better. Toasting our future friendship, the alien, for all this world a wind-shivered aspen in aspect, grows confiding. "We're," it lets slip, "group mind all." Ripplingly coy: "Pleasure me, you pleasure us all." It explains its - their - tastes. No witnesses.

Pleasure kills it.

All of them.

Steve Sneyd

THE RECONDITE REBUS

Michael Cobley

"Get rid of it! ..."

"Oh Uncle -"

"Look! Look! - it's starting on my books! Dissipate it immediately!"

"But -"

"Immediately!"

In the laboratory-cum-study belonging to Stropho Mycaster, Duke of Denfariss and Archmage to the courts of the Silverfish King, paper was omnipresent. Scrolls, letters, wads and pamphlets tumbled across Stropho's great desk in a glorious disarray; books and parchments lined the walls in deep dark shelves, their spines bearing titles inscribed in every one of the seven arcane tongues and a couple in characters both ancient and unknown.

At that moment, on a high shelf, there squatted a dragonette - a foot-long, scaly, winged and exact miniature of a two-hundred foot Denfariss heath dragon. It alternately chewed briskly on a mouthful of precious manuscript and snorted little flames from the nostrils that it twitched at regular intervals.

"Well Scanto?"

Scanto, son of Lord Falconet Mycaster and Stropho's nephew and apprentice, gave the dragonette a resentful glare that was answered with a gaze of insufferable smugness. Scanto sniffed at the scorched taint in the air and turned to his uncle, shrugging miserably and twisting the material of his workshift in nervous fingers.

"I'm sorry Uncle - I can't ..."

"And why not?"

"Well - I tried very hard, really ..."

"What, might I ask, was used in the transformation? Was it a Class Five creature? -"

"..."

"- no, I see that it was not -"

"... it was a mouse, Uncle. See, I thought ..."

"I doubt very much -" said Stropho, lifting Scanto's spell-jewel from around his neck, "- that thought had any part in it."

Duke Stropho brushed his long silvered black hair back from his face and brought the jewel up to his eye.

"Hmmm."

He frowned down at Scanto the returned his piercing eye to the tear-drop crystal held between finger and thumb. Nodding and muttering to himself he looked up, straightened in his unadorned green robe, and clasped the little gem before him. As he raised his other hand and moved the fingers in a single cancellation pass the dragonette ceased its vigorous munching, stared down in dragonish surprise - and puffed out of existence. In its place a little white mouse blinked with what could have been stunned amazement, the dived out of sight with a flick of the tail.

The Duke snorted with satisfaction and returned to contemplate his nephew who stood with face composed in doom-laden heroism. Stropho shook his head - it had probably been a bad idea to expose the boy to stage theatre, even at the age of fifteen. Of late he had taken to speaking his practice cantrips and chants in a voice redolent of cheap dramaturgy. Well, no matter. The boy's progress was more than satisfactory and he

looked to be the first of the students who would be crystal-bound. If that was so, then Scanto was potentially a very powerful mage - if only he would keep his hastier impulses under constraint.

If only I could bottle sunlight, he thought wryly, forcing sternness into his features and clearing his throat.

"Scanto - your spell-jewel."

"Thankyou Uncle," said the boy meekly, accepting the pendant and replacing it round his neck.

"Now - I must be about pressing business. Your father and the King are arriving this afternoon for a very important meeting ..."

"Can't I ..."

"No, you cannot!" he said, looking imperiously down his nose. "Which is why you will be helping Jeffro in the stables for the rest of the day until dinner, or your father calls for your presence, whichever is the sooner."

"Oh ..."

"But before you leave I would like you to repeat, aloud, the standard precepts of Transformation -" Scanto's face fell. "-'Unfortunately I will not be present to hear what will undoubtedly be a flawless rendition ..."

Scanto brightened visibly.

"Oh, you can trust me, Uncle."

Stropho gave his nephew his broadest of smiles.

"Trust, nephew, is a substance conspicuous by its ethereality: not only must one earn it, one must work hard to build it within. Rankle will hear your oration in my stead."

Scanto stifled a groan as a deep basso "Ho, Ho, Ho!" came from a darkened corner of the study.

"Not that pot-bellied little oaf!" Scanto muttered as the weskitted gnoll left the dim corner (which really concealed a door leading to the gnoll's residence) and stood beside Stropho, squat head thrown back to look up.

"Was that the transformation precepts you mentioned, Duke?"

"It was indeed, Rankle. It would seem that my nephew's memory is lacking in some details and I would take it as a kindness if you would monitor his learning today."

"Transformations, eh?"

The little creature padded over to the desk, pulled himself up with a small gnarled hand and after clearing a space among the papers, sat on the edge.

"Starts with that little rhyme, don't it?" Rankle said. "'With rat into mouse the power is low, but rat into cat just should not go'. Of course, reminds me what that Fat Rebel Rolph tried when he kidnapped the King - I mean, man into squirrel ..."

"Rankle!" snapped Stropho, "your loquacity will unleash havoc one of these full-moon nights!"

Scanto saw the opportunity to score a point.

"Yeah - what's the difference between your mouth and the castle gates?"

Rankle frowned.

"Don't know - what?"

Scanto looked about him with airy innocence.

"Well - sometimes they close the gates."

"That's enough." Stropho breathed out through his nostrils with noisy impatience. I must go. Now, no misbehaviour from you nephew, no mischief and positively no prankster spells - a gnoll like Rankle is magically neutral, in case you had forgotten."

"I hadn't," said Scanto sulkily.

"Good. Rankle - Scanto is your pupil until he completes one successful reiteration."

Rankle grinned sideways at Scanto as the Duke snatched a wide-brimmed hat from the doorhook and left.

"Is it true, then?" said Scanto, settling into the wide leather armchair next to the desk.

"What true?"

"About the rebel wizard Rolph, kidnapping the King? I know Rolph escaped ..." Scanto looked up wide-eyed. "That's what this meeting's for - I bet! Eh, what do you think?"

"I think you ought to begin at 'With rat into mouse ...'..."

"If you're so smart, why aren't you taller!"

"All the better to bite your shins! Now, shall we?"

Scanto sighed. "With rat into mouse the power is low ..."

The King's retinue was late in arriving, such that by the time cries came from the watchpost the sun was well past setting. Sitting at the end of the Grand Hall's balcony, where a tall window looked down on to the courtyard, Scanto scratched his stomach and yawned gapingly. He wasn't really in the mood for a game of Scatter-ound, especially a game played against his jewel (which, in his opinion, was far too clever). The gem, unclasped from its setting, lay before him glowing in the centre of a disc of leather. Pebbles of two colours were arranged on the radial markings on the disc; from the state of play it was clear that the Blacks had trapped all the Reds, bar one. Not surprisingly, it was Scanto that was playing Red.

It's humiliating, he thought irritably, to be beaten by a little chunk of rock. It

can't think, it can't move about, it can't talk, and yet it can beat me at Scatteround.

He sighed and pressed a forefinger down on top of the jewel. Concentrating he could sense what would be the jewel's next move and with a sniff of resignation he moved the remaining Black predator in to close on his last free Red ...

Suddenly, sounding immense in the hall's glacial quiet, a scratching scrabbling came

He groaned inwardly. Surely they weren't laying out the conclave accoutrements at the hour! If he were found up here he would have to endure reminders of it from his Uncle for weeks after.

Slowly he rose against the wooden barrier and peeked over the edge, down at the figures that moved in the blurred half-light. Scanto watched as two men, one wrapped in wide and strangely hooded robes, conferred

THE GARDS OF INFLEXION
AROUND THE WORLD WITH SATAN
VISIONS IN THE HAND
PARODIES
THE COMPLEAT ORC
A COMPENDIUM OF HIGH LIMERICKS
A PICTORIAL ACCOUNT OF TONGUE COATINGS
JOY OF CHICKENS
TRILOGY-BURNING AS A HOBBY
ESTHETICS OF SPELL-CASTING
101 DESPICABLE THINGS TO DO TO A DWARF
HOBBIES & PASTIMES

from somewhere along in the balcony shadows. He heart jumped as he gathered up the pieces and the disc and stuffed them in a pouch ... just as a tiny black nose closely followed by twin bundles of twitching whiskers appeared out of the glimmer. Scanto grinned as he recognised his white mouse from the notch in its right ear and was about to creep across to scoop it up when a thud and a curse came from the hall below.

in whispers and then began to remove some pictures from the walls. They started at the doors and worked their way around the hall, taking down several portraits from above doorways and windows and replacing them with what Scanto assumed to be other paintings, squarer and smaller.

A couple of times he almost decided to disclose his presence but something held him back, some vague uneasiness that seemed to

seep up from below. As he lowered himself there was a click and a tiny rattle followed by the sound of little claws scrabbling on polished wood. He looked round and was dismayed to see the white mouse scurrying away with his spell jewel in its open jaws, the glowing from the stone lighting up the rodent's skull with a weird pinkness.

Scanto saw the pouch lying on its side with reds and blacks strewn from its open mouth, and panicked. With a flying curse he snatched at the little white thief who easily dodged his swooping fingers and scurried off into the deepest and darkest shadows. Scrambling on hands and knees Scanto pursued the bobbing radiance along the balcony, desperation clouding his senses from registering the dark form that swept up the steps from the hall and sprang on his from behind.

Completely startled he struggled briefly in the iron grip that dragged him along and down into the hall. But there was the whisper of old, old words, the twisting gesture of a hand with fingers bunched and as the familiar taint of magic filled the air around him Scanto could only think of one word before oblivion ...

... trap ... trap ... trap ...

His hands were tied and since a gag was currently occupying his mouth yelling for help was well down on the list of possible courses of action. He could do nothing but sit there in what he was sure was an alcove cupboard and listen to the voices that had woken him.

There was the deep smoothness of his uncle and the assertive gravelly voice of his father, along with several others he did not recognise. All of them were talking, most quietly, about the day, the weather, their breakfast, their night's sleep, the King or some combination thereof. But it was all in indistinct tones muffled by the cupboard door and the curtain that concealed the alcove.

He moved himself, with difficulty, up to the door and pressed his ear against it to improve his eavesdropping. Almost at the same instant a voice of silken venom spoke, so close it felt to be directly level with his ear.

"So you're awake, spyling. Not long now, not long; when one more completes the collection then you can join them."

Scanto remained silent and shuddered. The black interior of the cupboard was suddenly cramped and oppressive and the fear that tingled his senses swamped the stuffy smell of clean linen.

After a short but tense length of time the voices outside were raised in laudatory greetings, some dangerously close to grovelling, so there could be no doubt who had just entered the hall.

"... Why, your Majesty ..."

"Highness, is not the day ..."

"Fair morning, O Majesty ..."

Something moved outside Scanto's cupboard.

"Now is the time," said the voice, full of triumph.

The door opened and those same iron hands dragged him to his feet and pushed him through the alcove curtain. The hall spun round him as he lost his footing and tumbled in a heap to an accompanying chorus of outraged voices that trailed off as the curtain was whipped aside.

One of the King's guards was already rushing the man who stood there, Stropho was yelling at the guard to stop and the black-bearded man was laughing joyfully, almost uncontrollably. For as the guard drew nearer to the intruder his run slowed to a walk and ground to a halt only feet from the alcove. The guard's arms fell to his sides, his sword slipped from a dangling hand and after another still moment he slumped to the ground, unmoving.

"Now everyone stay where they are," said Stropho as he left the group, huddled around the head of the table where Scanto now sat, watched over by his father. He watched his uncle walk slowly towards the prone guard stretched out before the man who was tall, dressed in a servitor's garb and grinning a grin like a knife. Stropho paused at a point two thirds of the distance between the group and the alcove, sniffed loudly and looked at the man.

"The guard is dead I take it."

"Certainly."

"Poor Alon," murmured the King, and Stropho nodded.

"Yes. It begins here doesn't it? A smothering circle, quite a tight one I should think."

The man lifted his hand and clapped, slowly, four times.

"Very good, Stropho, yes indeed, well done. And supported how?"

Stropho looked around the room, saw the little pictures and nodded.

"A rebus - most elegant."

The man tilted his head, as if acknowledging praise.

"I did learn at your feet, after all."

"You never learned this from me!" Stropho shot back immediately. "Or how to reach into the habitat of a magus - who aided you, Rolph, was it an Archus demon? They demand payment in human flesh, don't they?"

Scanto gazed in amazement at the thin man

glaring hatred at his uncle - could this really be Fat Rolph? Stories portrayed him as a great barrel of a man, possessed of hidden muscles and stamina - not this angular cadaverous presence.

"Silence! Shut your mouth, I will not be lectured to by a monarchic vassal, a jester to kings!"

"Better a jester," said Stropho quietly, "than a demon's feeding trough."

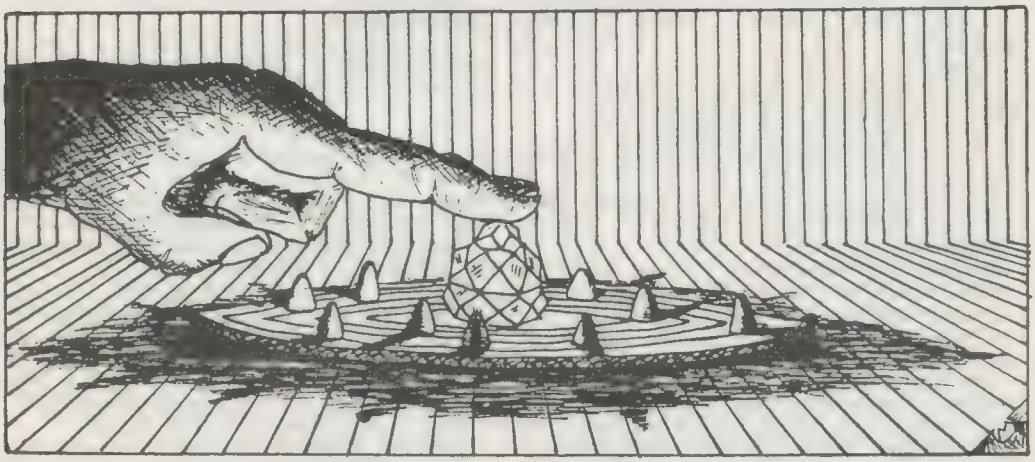
The magus turned to look at the other captives then back at Rolph, smiling. "So what is the nature of the key to this little box, hmm?"

"You expect me to tell you?" Rolph reached into his jerkin and brought out a single-gem pendant the size of his palm and flushed with a slowly shifting radiance from deep in its violet heart. Scanto's eyes were fixed on it - he had never seen any magus'

"Such an uproar - Silence! - as well as being unfitting to your stations is also an affront to my royal personage ... I understand your concern but I would take it as an act of duty for you all to regain your dignity while Archmage Mycaster -" Stropho started at the sound of his name, "- explains our entrapment."

Then, gesturing for Stropho to begin, the King sat on the edge of the table. His remaining guard stood nearby, grim-faced with his sword unsheathed as the courtiers looked expectantly at the Archmage.

"Yes, ah ... um, your Majesty. We are in the jaws of a smothering circle trap, a deadly one, set by a dangerous man. Those of you cognizant of the thaumaturgic sciences will know that such a working is insupportable without a concentrated source. Thus the rebus." He pointed to the small pictures



crystal, other than the warm opaque one belonging to his uncle. Rolph ran a finger along the facet edges as he continued to speak.

"Yes ... I think I will. It is a word." He smiled deep and ruthless. "Maybe two. Look to the points of my rebus." Then his hand seemed to blur over the surface of the great jewel and he was gone. Stropho frowned, muttering to himself as he turned back to the others.

A resurging babble of panic was muzzled by the King who stepped up on to a chair to shout everyone down. Scanto had to stifle a snigger at the pained look that crossed his uncle's face as the King's shoe heels dug into the chair's rich upholstery. The twenty-odd courtiers, barons and burghers fell silent as their King called for their attention.

above the door and windows, five in all. "Each picture will support a storage spell; they are tied together by their own symbology and locked with ... well, a word or a phrase common to all five. I would only need to speak it and we would be free immediately."

"What if you can't?" came a hesitant voice.

Stropho smiled humourlessly.

"Then once the rebus' storage is exhausted the smothering circle will collapse. Inwards."

In the horrified silence that followed Stropho turned to Scanto.

"I think this is an opportunity, nephew, for you to recount to us all your experiences - as precisely as you can."

Scanto swallowed, paused, then launched into his tale. When he reached the moment

where the mouse ran off with his jewel his uncle, instead of frowning darkly, raised an eyebrow in an otherwise impassive face, and somehow Scanto found this more unsettling than a frown would have been.

"I see," said Stropho.

"Who was the second man?" asked Scanto's father, standing nearby.

"That was no man, Falconet." Stropho wore a distant half-smile filled with sadness. "When I accused Rolph of dealing in demonic trade I was only delving at possibilities but what Scanto tells us seems to confirm it. My oh my - an Archus demon, walking around my house, bold as you please ..."

Stropho's voice tailed away as he looked up at the picture hanging above a nearby window. Then he turned to face the company of captives, all trace of indecision absent from his features.

"Come! - there is not an instant that can be safely lost. Scanto, Falconet ... ah, your Majesty ..."

"Mmm?"

"May I take it that your sight is in its usual condition of clarity, sire?"

"Yes - why do you ask, Stropho?"

Stropho strode around the table, sensing the boundaries of safety.

"You see, Majesty, we must identify that which is common to these pictures ... Baron Vambryce?"

A broad-shouldered man in orange and green velvet looked up at the mention of his name.

"Duke Mycaster," he acknowledged.

"Your archer's sight - willing to put it to a test?"

Vambryce flashed a grin and after a few moments instruction from Stropho, Scanto, his father, the King and Baron Vambryce (and Stropho himself) were positioned at safe distances before the five pictures of the rebus. They began by describing their pictures in generalities, gradually becoming more specific as they explored the details which became so infuriating that Scanto realised that they had been painted that way purposely.

Vambryce cursed, Falconet shook his head and Stropho muttered words in a wash of languages both ancient and magical, while the King, red and perspiring, had removed all his upper garments bar an undershirt.

A score of courtly nostrils flared at this brazen impropriety but the King stood, content and apparently oblivious while his courtiers wriggled in their own stifling discomfort. Glimpsing their clandestine contortions Scanto had to bite his lip to bury his bubbling laughter.

"Yes," nodded Stropho as they took a short rest, "the temperature is rising, I'm afraid. This refinement to the spell is proof that Rolph has been taught by someone knowledgeable - I wonder what else he learned? Well, it can only get so hot; after all, his spells have to last long enough."

"For what?" said the King.

Stropho shrugged, fanning himself with a portion of his robe.

"To reach the capital, I presume. He probably has a loyal band of freedom rebels there, waiting for his order to cast off the shackles of the peasantry! Hmmph." The Archmage shook his head. "For all that he was one of my more capable pupils, he still learned little of social hierarchies ..."

"Whereas I know mine intimately," said the King with a meaningful look, "and if you don't find a way out of this ... this ..."

"Rebus," murmured Scanto half-attentively, his eyes on the main door.

They paused to look at the boy before the King continued.

"... yes ... so if we don't get out, I shall probably lose my hierarchy! What happens to this Commoner's Council of yours then?"

"It is not mine, your Majesty, as if it were personal property. Only the idea can be said to be mine truly. But you are quite right - we are wasting our time. What do we have from these thrice-damned conundrums?"

"A carved wooden figurine, just a man with no features, standing upright ..."

"... an amputated hand off at the wrist, fingers pointing away from the observer ..."

"... the skin from a gatten, flayed and hung out on a stretching frame ..."

"Thankyou, Majesty, and mine is a plain sheaf of wheat ... Scanto, pay attention!"

"Oh! - ah, it was a lock of hair!"

Stropho nodded and Scanto immediately looked back to the main door, but cursed silently when he saw it empty. For just a moment ago his mouse had been sitting there, in full view, on its haunches and turning his jewel over and over in its tiny paws as it tried the dimly glowing facets with its diminutive teeth. Now it was gone.

"... and these objects are sitting in the centre of the pictures, on tables ..."

"No, not on tables, not in all five, only in three ..."

"Oh come, who will define a table for me, eh? By shape or by function ...?"

"Baron, will you kindly restrain that magnificent bellow of yours?"

"Apologies, Majesty."

It was a shame, really. A spell jewel, even a weak practice toy, was very expensive. Scanto's heart sank - his uncle's ire would know no bounds if the jewel remained lost, assuming they all escaped unhurt.

"... and the horses, Baron, what of them, hmm ...?"

"There are only three horses, you know, a pair of spurs in a fourth and saddle ..."

"If I might answer for myself, Falconet ... yes, 'horse' is the word, I'd say ..."

"In that case we might as well say that the word is 'plant' as there is something growing in each one ..."

"... and in any case, the actual horses aren't there ..."

Where had the mouse gone? he wondered. Would it learn to use the jewel? A magical mouse! A radiant rodent! He held back a chuckle as he followed the improbable train of thought. Perhaps it would tire of being small, he thought, perhaps change itself into something huge and fierce ... like a cat.

"... Wait! - that's it! ..."

"I wish you'd warn us before you do that, Stropho ..."

"Yes ... ah ... Majesty, you see? The horses are not there, but the spurs and the saddle ..."

"What is he on about?"

"The answer has been staring us in the face, my friends. There - five objects linked by the one thing that isn't present! Look; a wooden figure - carved; and amputated hand - cut; an animal skin - flayed; a sheaf of wheat - cut; and a lock of hair ..."

"Are you sure that the hair was cut?"

"We shall see - Scanto?"

"Mmm?"

"Go and look at ... Nephew!"

"Sorry? What was that?"

Stropho snorted impatiently and glared.

"This is neither the time nor place for daydreaming. Now go to your picture and tell us if the hair is a bundle or if it looks to be sharply cut."

Sighing, Scanto nodded and went over to where a chair stood midway between the table end and the main door. He stepped up and held on to the chair's straight back as he peered across at the lock of hair that lay in the centre of a little white table which sat in a flowery dell.

"Yes," he called out, "it's been cut all right, I can see where all the ends lie together ..."

Funny, he thought, how I can feel completely wide awake one moment and exhausted the next. I couldn't have slept well last night ...

"You can step down now Scanto ..."

... must have been kept awake all night ...

"Falconet! - quick, your son! ..."

He felt hands slip around his waist and tug him away from a wonderfully warm embrace, like the smoothest, silkiest bed blankets imaginable ...

Cool air was being fanned on to his face as he became aware of being held by someone, and as a kind of dizziness lifted from his thoughts he suddenly knew what had nearly happened.

"Uncle!"

"Ssh! - quiet!"

He looked up into his father's face which seemed to soften its sternness as he spoke on. "Yes, you nearly got caught in another of that Rolph's 'refinements' as your uncle calls them." He paused and against the scrapes and murmurs of their fellow captives, Scanto could hear his uncle's voice muttering strange words in different intonations. "Apparently this smothering is slowly contracting and you were caught on its edge as it moved past your chair. Stropho tells me that it means we have less time than we thought."

"Did Uncle find the word?"

Falconet nodded. "He feels sure the word is 'Knife' -"

"I see ..."

" - the only problem being the language this rebus key is in. Do you want to sit up now?"

Scanto nodded and his father lifted him by the shoulders into a sitting position where Scanto let his legs hang over the table edge.

"Father?"

"What?"

Pause. Then: "I'm scared."

Scanto felt a strong arm round his shoulders.

"For what it's worth, I am too."

Scanto looked surprised and his father hurried on.

"After all, I remember what my father told me, long before you were born, that a man only grows up when he discovers his fear and still does what must be done." His father smiled faintly, as if at a distant memory. "Or a woman for that matter."

Just then Stropho joined them, slumping down into a nearby chair. Scanto had never seen him look so dejected.

"I have spoken the word 'Knife'," he began, "in every one of the seven Arcane tongues, in the Hermetic, Necromantic and Aeromantic argots, in the semi-hypnotic cant of the Nine-Island Priests, in the primitive idiom of the prescient Huruku, even that of the aquatic Higli, with their excruciating locution, and nothing, not a single response or indication that I'm making any progress ..."

Scanto, at that moment, was not quite

listening as his father tried to console his brother. Because just then something had appeared at the bottom of the alcove curtain - Scanto felt a tinge of astonished fascination, for it was the twitching nose and whiskers of a small white mouse!

For an instant he seriously wondered if his earlier speculations had actually come true, but then dismissed the idea. He remembered the previous day - if the mouse could, wouldn't it rather turn itself into a dragonette than a cat? But then, Scanto thought, if I were a shapechanger I could turn myself into a gnoll like Rankle and just walk out.

And in the next instant, he knew it. Of course, getting the answer was like trying to turn a dragon back into the mouse! Yes, yes, of course ...

"... and I tried the Bard's Inflections, and a dozen other pitches and timbres ..."

"Uncle ..."

"... and if I included cancellation gestures, of which there are scores, I'd be here till next year, but that seems somewhat improbable ..."

"Uncle. I've ..."

"... I wonder if a pentacle is necessary? ..."

"Uncle, it's very important!"

"Oh, Scanto, you will drive me to distraction with your incessant interruption! What is it?"

Scanto leaned towards his uncle.

"What's Gnoll for knife?"

Stropho gave him a pitying look.

"The Gnollish language has no connection whatsoever with theurgy, Scanto. So how it can help me unravel a compound spell like the rebus is quite beyond me. I am a little saddened by this display of your lack of ..."

"But it fits!"

"Fits?"

"It's not there! - like the horses, like the knife!"

Stropho paused to think, his eyes shadowy with fatigue. At length he shrugged.

"It can do no harm to try," he said, rising from his chair and speaking in a deep and melodious voice: "Sirkh."

At once in the painting above the window, a mouth appeared on the face of the wooden figurine and uttered a single word.

"Hustragival."

It was as if a door had opened. Fresh air swept around them, brushing away the oppressive mugginess which was all that remained of Rolph's spell.

"You've done it!" cheered the King as he snatched up his clothes. "That is it, isn't it?"

"Eh? - oh, yes Majesty, it's gone, dispelled ..."

"Stropho, what seems to be bothering you?"

"Rolph had nested spells, one within another ... takes a great deal of power to accomplish that ... Well, let's be gone. If we are fortunate we will overtake him before he can attain the capital. Scanto?" He turned to his pupil and smiled broadly. "I'm ah, most impressed. Full marks - you'll find another spell-jewel in the third drawer down on the left of the desk."

Scanto's original jewel was never recovered, even though its position was located by his uncle on his return from the capital. (Rolph's nascent coup was nipped in the bud just as the first palace patrol was being ambushed. Nearly a hundred of Rolph's followers were seized but, as before, he evaded capture.)

It was surprising for the Duke to learn that the little jewel was deep in the foundations of the house, providing light and heat for a dozen or so mice. This, however, was nowhere near as unsettling as that which awaited him in his study.

As he entered he just had time to dodge the small white object that whizzed past his head, struck the wall with what was an undeniable 'Squeak!' and rebounded across the study to disappear in the mountain of papers atop the desk. Quickly he closed the door and stared down at his nephew who cowered wide-eyed at the side of the armchair. Rankle's bald and wrinkled head emerged as he peered out from behind Scanto.

"What ..." began Stropho.

He was cut off as the paper mound erupted, flinging scrolls in every direction as the unmistakable shape of a white mouse sprang forth, bounding up to disappear behind a shelf of books. Stropho decided that now was as good a time as any to lose his temper.

"What in the Nine Fuliginous Hells have you been up to?" he snarled at the unhappy Scanto. "No, don't tell me - a Transformation, am I correct?"

A woebegone nod.

"And which unfortunate member of the animal kingdom has been the victim of your delicate ministrations this time?"

Scanto raised his eyes to the heavens momentarily, as if in supplication.

"Well, I ... you see, I caught this flea ..."

At this the Duke gave Scanto his most withering of looks, for he truly felt at a loss for words.

THE END

MAGAZINES

The lack of a review column in the last issue of BACK BRAIN RECLUSE, combined with the prolonged absence of your humble editor from these cold and drizzly climes, has meant the pile of packets in the IN tray awaiting perusal has long since overflowed and swelled to gargantuan proportions, assuming superpower domination of the surrounding desktop and threatening a major invasion of the neighbouring floorspace. Notwithstanding, Chris Bonnington's sherpa carriers were dragged out of retirement, and after much toil, sleepless nights, bloodshot eyes and inky fingers, access was at last gained to the typewriter. All of which simply means to say I finally decided it was high time I got on with the reviews, or they'd never be done at all.

In the four short years that BACK BRAIN RECLUSE has been running now, a very wide variety of publications have passed through this review section, from the music fanzines I first started trading with through the small-ads in SOUNDS, to some of the high-class literary small-press magazines available today. The variety continues not only in the fields covered by the magazines I receive, but also in the quality of their content and production. One must always bear in mind that for the most part these are only amateur magazines produced in their editors' spare time, and that as such they are limited by the resources, both financial and technical, they have at their disposal. With BACK BRAIN RECLUSE, for example, I try to produce a very visual publication, but only because I can call upon the services of Matt Brooker, SMS and Kaiser Bill to liven up the pages graphically. Obviously, not every editor has the same intentions for his magazine, nor high quality artists to work for him.

One magazine at the top of the range that continues to be a favourite of mine is Gordon Linzner's SPACE & TIME, a 120-page six-monthly sf/fantasy/horror magazine from New York. In #71, the most recent edition, all the stories display a consistently high standard of originality and innovation, but particularly impressive were 'Starlet' by Rick Shelley, 'Vintage' by Steven Shaffer and 'The Trojan Man' by Jared Mark Graham. Although the names may be unfamiliar, the reputation that SPACE & TIME has acquired over its twenty year life means that it can pick the best from a very good crop of submissions, so a good read is always guaranteed. The artwork ranges from good to excellent, while the overall production is very slick. But then again, if I had as much experience in the publishing game as Mr. Linzner, I'd like to think BACK BRAIN RECLUSE would be of a comparable standard. Consistently good value, and well worth investigating.

Of the home-grown market, the only sf-oriented small-press magazine that anywhere near approaches SPACE & TIME at least in terms of volume is SF SPECTRUM. This comes in several separate units SUNDAY TIMES style, with SF SPECTRUM itself, and the additional supplements MACABRE (horror and supernatural), SF SPECTRUM EXTRA (articles, reviews and interviews), SF WRITERS & POETS, and COSMIC COMMENTS (letters and feedback). Editor Wieslaw Tumulka and I have this ongoing discussion about the merits and convenience of dividing SF SPECTRUM up like this instead of having it all within a single cover, but he's not yet convinced me. I think it's a point we'll have to agree to disagree on.

I read somewhere that SF SPECTRUM was created as a 'pulp' for the 1980s, and to a certain extent that's reflected in its content. There's a preoccupation with the discovery of intelligent life out in the big black yonder, 'A Hint of Sludge' closing with the perennial 'Let there be light', and 'The Loggum' using the well-trodden theme of an interstellar Third Reich. However, the stories from familiar names Steve Sneyd and Don Webb manage to avoid the cliché trap to provide some interesting reading. There's also a liberal selection of sf verse from John Light, Dwight Humphries, Colin Nixon, Pete Presford, Steve Sneyd and others, but rather too crammed on to the page for my liking.

The horror stories in MACABRE do not evoke the feelings of shock/fear/disgust that they should, at times reading more like newspaper reports than evocative fiction. The one exception to this, and it is a very big exception, is 'Nature and Mr. Humphries' by established American horror writer J.N. Williamson. He demonstrates his skill and experience by using suspense, fear and underdescription to forge a real gem of a tale that on its own is justification enough for investing in a copy of the magazine. My congratulations to Wieslaw for getting hold

of it, and I look forward to the other Williamson story in the pipeline.

Consistently interesting and informative are the articles found in SF SPECTRUM EXTRA, in which Steve Sneyd and Brian Aldiss discuss the current state of UK sf poetry, whilst Andy Darlington, on journalistic form as usual, writes about Frank Herbert of DUNE fame in SF WRITERS & POETS. On the whole SF SPECTRUM is a bit of a mixed bag, varying from okay to excellent, but so long as those little gems remain it's a worthy contender for my pocket money.

A little magazine in a class of its own for which I have particular fondness is ANACONDA. It's not because Dan Clayton regularly proclaims that BACK BRAIN RECLUSE is his favourite small-press magazine, or that it was a major influence in the creation of ANACONDA, but rather because he manages to combine established contributors, such as John Light and Steve Sneyd (that man pops up everywhere!!), with stories, reviews and articles by Dan himself and his mates down there in Salisbury. I for one am hooked on the continuing sagas of 'Herbert of Os' and 'The Exile', whilst piss-takes like 'Arthur' give ANACONDA a lively irreverance. ANACONDA is to the small-press establishment what garage bands were to the music business: lively, exuberant and just waiting to be discovered. A name to watch.

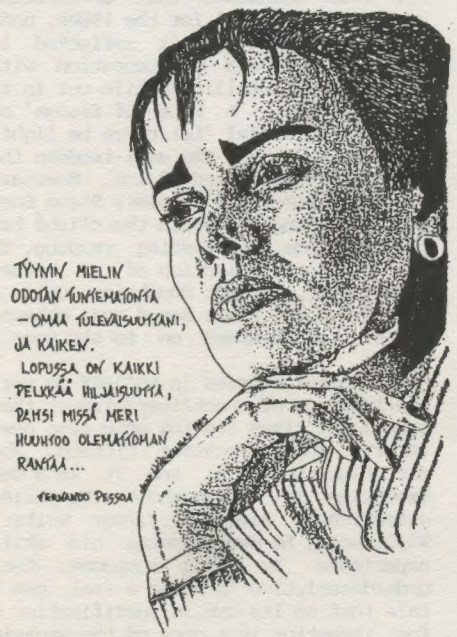
Chris Reed.

Magazines Featured in this Article:

SPACE & TIME, Gordon Linzner, 138 W. 70th St. (4B), New York 10023-4432 USA. #71: A5, 120pp, $4, 2/$8, 4/$15 (surface rates).

SF SPECTRUM, Wieslaw Tumulka, 14 Sheerstock, Haddenham, Nr. Aylesbury, Bucks HP17 8EN. #12: A5, 40pp, £1.30, 6/£3.75. Includes MACABRE #8: A5, 28pp; SF SPECTRUM EXTRA #8: A5, 24pp; SF WRITERS AND POETS #6: A5, 8pp; and COSMIC COMMENTS #3: A6, 4pp. Wieslaw also has the following chapbooks currently available: WOLFPACK poetry by Dwight E. Humphries: A5, 24pp, 35p + P&P; INSPECTOR OF THE CROSS - Chapter 1: THE GODSTONE first of a 12 part novel by John Rosenman: A5, 28pp, 35p + P&P.

ANACONDA, Dan Clayton, 'Dungarth', Middle Winterslow, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP5 1QL. #9: A5, 32pp, 50p



Finnish artist Jouni Waarakangas has produced his own magazine ... UNTA JOKAINEN KATSOO ..., a very fine 32 page A4 collection of his work which has recently provided a cover for IDOMO as well as the contents page of this issue of BACK BRAIN RECLUSE.

Jouni is very eager to get in touch with magazine editors in the UK and US, and offers UJK of his postcard set (sampled on the left) in trade for sample copies of other magazines. Jouni also hopes to take magazines to sell in Finland.

If you're interested in getting in touch with Jouni, you can contact him at the following address:

JOUNI WAARAKANGAS,
POSTE RESTANTE,
00980 HELSINKI 98,
FINLAND.

Also Received:

Poetry

FOLIO, Tom Bingham, 82 Dresden Close, Corby, Northants NN18 9EN. #13: A5, 32pp, £1.25. An excellently produced magazine with a very good reputation.

HOOLIGAN HEART, Steve Birtles, 140 Curzon Road, Ashton-u-Lyne, Lancs. #2: A5, 60pp, 75p + P&P. High energy, high impact poetry. Not for the faint hearted.

KRAX, Andy Robson, 63 Dixon Lane, Leeds LS12 4RR. #22: A5, 48pp, £1 + P&P, 4/£5. Another bastion of the small-press. Andy also has available SCRAPE #1: A5, 32pp, 50p + P&P, a prose offshoot of KRAX.

PSYCHOPOETICA, Geoff Lowe, Dept. of Psychology, Univ. of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX. #6: A4, 48pp, £1. Psychologically based poetry. An interesting read.

Prose

AUGURIES, Nik Morton, 235 West St., Fareham, Hants PO16 0HZ. #5: A5, 40pp, 50p + P&P. The South Hants SF magazine.

GLOBAL TAPESTRY, Dave Cunliffe, Spring Bank, Salesbury, Blackburn, Lancs BB1 9EU. #18: A5, 80pp, £1.50, 4/£5. Good quality short stories, plus poems and reviews. A meaty read!

JENNINGS, 43 Tredegar Square, London E3 5AE. #2: A4, 40pp, £2, 4/£6. Semi-pro magazine with a short-story competition in every issue.

MAGAZING, Tape Books, 6 Athole Gardens, Glasgow G12 9AY. #7: A5, 32pp; #8: A5, 44pp. Prices not known. Sneyd, Gimblett, Macrae, Darlington et al.

Market

FACTSHEET FIVE, Mike Gunderloy, 6 Arizona Ave., Rensselaer, NY 12144-4502 USA. #21: A4, 80pp, $2 surface, $5 airmail. Over 500 magazines reviewed, plus articles, letters, books, music. Has to be seen to be believed!

FANZINE FANATIQUE, Keith & Rosemary Walker, 6 Vine Street, Greaves, Lancaster LA1 4UF. #65: A4, 4pp, for trade. Reviews UK fanzines but falls foul to the illegible photocopied dotmatrix printer syndrome. A pity.

LIGHT'S LIST, John Light, 29 Longfield Road, Tring, Herts HP23 4DG. 6pp, 25p + SAE. A straight list of over 160 literary magazines currently circulating in the UK. Handy for reference.

SCANTLE, Pete Presford, 'Rose Cottage', 3 Tram Lane, Buckley, Clwyd, N. Wales CH7 3JB. #1: A4, 6pp, 5/£2. A newszine with those bits of information you can usually never lay your hands on.

SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER, Janet Fox, 519 Ellinwood, Osage City, KS 66523 USA. #34: A5, 12pp, 12/$16. Articles, reviews and letters, plus market information from both sides of the Atlantic. A firm favourite.

WRITE NOW, Dene October, 84 Colwyn Road, Northampton NN1 3PX. #2: A4, 16pp, £1.50, 6/£8, 12/£15. Articles and UK market news. Interesting.

Collections

FIFTY-FIFTY INFINITY by Steve Sneyd: A5, 20pp, 50p + P&P from Tape Books, address as per MAGAZING. A collection of 50 of Steve's 50-word minisagas as appeared in ANACONDA, BACK BRAIN RECLUSE, MAGAZING, SF SPECTRUM and others.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RAINBOW a novella by Steve Sneyd: A5, 28pp, £1.35 from K.T. Publications, 16 Fane Close, Stamford, Lincs PE9 1HG. A good read.

CHURCH BELLS ON A WET SUNDAY poetry by Deirdre Armes Smith: A5, 20pp, £1.85 from National Poetry Foundation, 6 Larches Gdns, Catisfield, Fareham, Hants PO15 5LR.

Miscellaneous

ERGOT/I THINK I'M CRACKING UP, Simon Bostock 18 Gallows Inn Close, Ilkeston, Derbyshire DE7 4BU. A4, 16pp each, for SAE. One-man-band magazines.

PENUMBRA, Mike Cobley, 18 Athole Gdns, Hillhead, Glasgow G12. #1: A5, 8pp. 'A forum for serious discussion'.

RED BASS, PO Box 10258, Tallahassee, FL 32302 USA. #11: A3, 32pp, $2, 4/$6. Newspaper format magazine with serious and intelligent articles on civil liberties and other social/political issues, an interview with Kurt Vonnegut, plus prose, reviews and some poetry. Very polished professional production - recommended.

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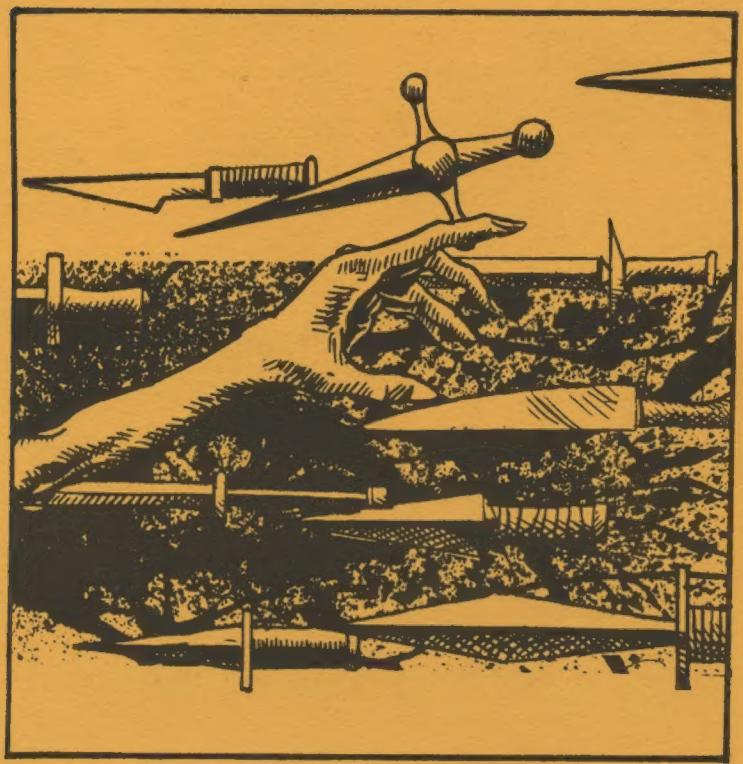
ALWAYS TRY TO INCLUDE AN S.A.E. IF ONLY WRITING FOR INFORMATION.
PLEASE MENTION BACK BRAIN RECLUSE WHEN WRITING TO OTHER MAGAZINES.

A CUT ABOVE THE REST



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